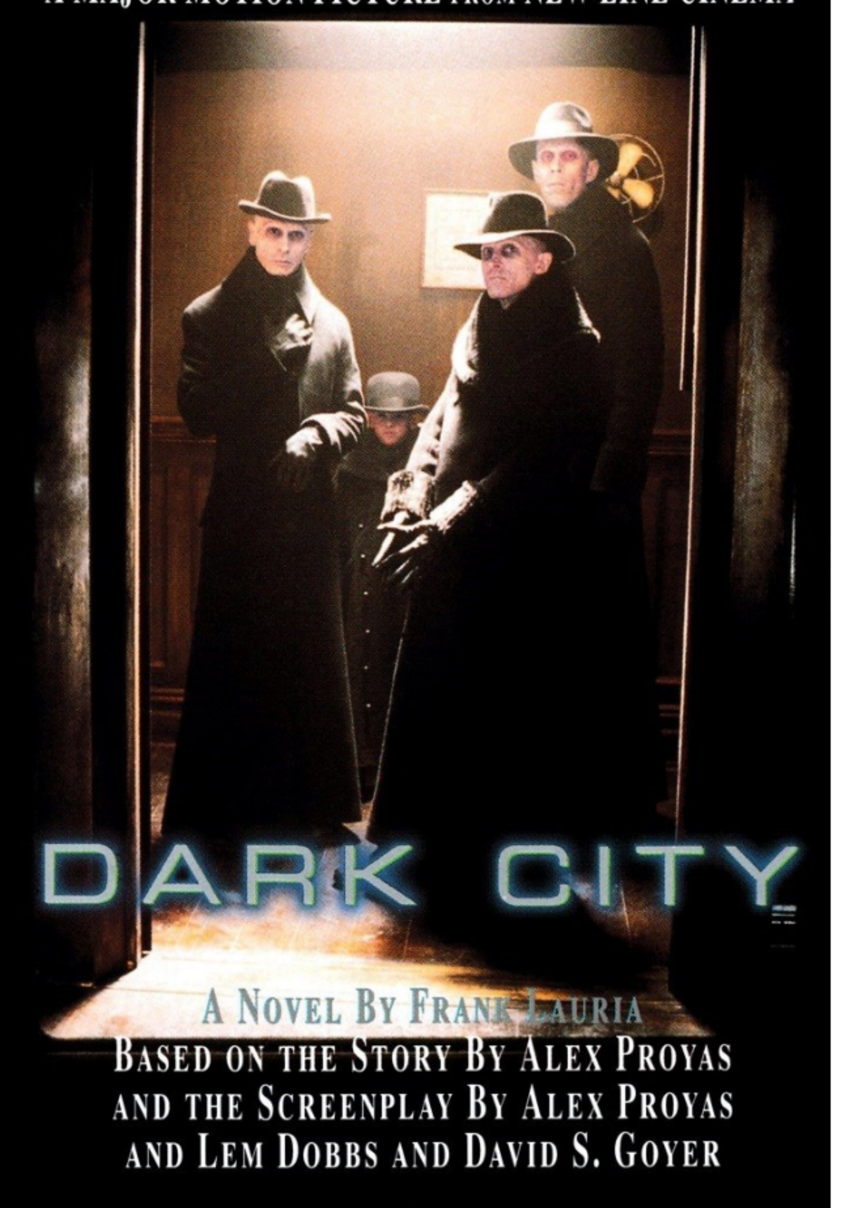


A NEW SCI-FI ADVENTURE AND
A MAJOR MOTION PICTURE FROM NEW LINE CINEMA
DARK CITY
A NOVEL BY FRANK LAURIA
BASED ON THE STORY BY ALEX PROYAS
AND THE SCREENPLAY BY ALEX PROYAS
AND LEM DOBBS AND DAVID S. GOYER

THE ULTIMATE SCI-FI THRILLER IS NOW A BLOCKBUSTER MOTION PICTURE!

The police know his name and where he lives. They have the evidence and the bloodied bodies of the women they say he killed. There's just one thing they don't know about John Murdoch: he's their only hope.

DARK CITY

It's like no place you've ever been before. Where time stops and starts again. Where lies are the truths, truths are lies, and even memory is a hoax. And in this place where light has vanished and strangers rule, a man named Murdoch is accused of murder and labeled insane. But Murdoch is the only one who can stop the evil that has taken over—as long as he can stay alive . . .



DARK CITY

A NOVEL BY
FRANK LAURIA

BASED ON THE STORY BY ALEX PROYAS
AND THE SCREENPLAY BY
ALEX PROYAS AND LEM DOBBS AND
DAVID S. GOYER



St. Martin's Paperbacks

DARK CITY

Cover photograph by Jasin Boland.

ISBN: 0-312-96343-2

Printed in the United States of America



St. Martin's Paperbacks edition/January 1998

St. Martin's Paperbacks are published by St. Martin's Press, 175 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10010.

For Jimmy Breslin—
who gave me some damned good advice . . .

The dreamed and undreamt become each other
And mix night and day of your mind;
And it does not matter your twice crying
From mouth unbeautied against the pillow . . .

John Crowe Ransom
“Prelude to an Evening”

DARK CITY

Prologue

It began with a small thing.

A fragment from a passing comet spun into the dim gravity of their planet.

With the fragment came a dormant organism. The organism revived in the dark, dry atmosphere. Immediately it began consuming vital elements in the home planet's fragile ecosystem. And slowly began killing the inhabitants.

They were a race as ancient as time itself. Until now their species had had a life span in excess of a thousand years.

They survived by just being.

Unfortunately their life form had no need, hence no means, for migration to another planet.

So they waited. And they died.

The aliens were nearly extinct when a stray explorer wandered into their orbit. This time they were prepared. The moment the explorer craft landed, they penetrated.

They easily mastered the visitors by assuming control of their alien consciousness. Essentially they became parasites living through their hosts.

Then they left their doomed world for their hosts' home planet. But by the time they arrived, their life support had broken down. Many of their hosts had already died.

Eventually, *all* of the host species were exterminated.

However, using alien technology developed by their late hosts, they managed to manufacture life. They replicated their hosts—enabling the remnants of their own race to survive.

Then their last numbers filed onto the alien starship and soared into the unknown. Without even so much as a home planet they had become strangers in the universe.

The Strangers came upon a variety of possible worlds to colonize. But sooner or later their hosts expired.

And too, the Strangers were empty of purpose beyond survival. From their various conquests of alien worlds they had acquired disconnected technologies, sciences and techniques.

But as a whole it came to the same thing.

Boredom. As a species the Strangers shared a common

consciousness. Their thoughts were limited to function.

And as they traveled the disparate corners of the cosmos the Strangers found that most life forms were the same. Species existed to exist. Almost always in colonies.

For the Strangers, existence was an endless, mindless quest for a benign host. The concept would never occur to them, but in a strange way they were searching for the perfect lover.

A symbiotic relationship that would nurture new life.

On their own extremely rigid terms.

Because after all, they did not have the power to conceive, merely to consume.

Which was sufficient. Until they chanced upon a small blue world orbiting a minor star. The planet abounded in two elements that were lethal to the Strangers.

One was water. The other was sunlight.

But the species native to the planet was unlike any life form the Strangers had encountered in an infinite universe.

Their consciousness had . . . dimension.

At first the Strangers attached themselves to the minds of their new hosts. Immediately, both died.

For a thousand years the Strangers studied the Humans—as they were named. And their envy grew.

Humans had private thoughts. Incredible fantasies. Dreams. *Music.* And most fascinating—individual memories. In fact, the sum total of these memories formed much of their complex intelligence.

Not that the Strangers were without formidable powers. They had the ability to *control time.* They easily controlled humans by simply willing them to sleep.

The Strangers could also shape, bend and change most matter to suit their needs. But their very lack of . . . imagination, narrowed the scope of these powers.

And so the Strangers set out to acquire human memories. To possess them. To *be* them.

Methodically, night after never-ending night, they gathered in a vast godless temple. There in the underground darkness they activated enormous secret dynamos—and went out to steal human souls . . .

The massive metal face loomed in the darkness. Its sculpted iron features gazed impassively at existence, like some ancient idol.

Slowly, the brooding eyes parted and the cold metal features seemed to peel away, revealing a giant clock. Its deep, ominous ticking echoed across

the gloom.

A gloved hand reached out of the blackness, wrapped around a steel scissor switch, and yanked.

At once the clock's gleaming second hand stopped dead—and the world fell silent . . .

1

The hooded lightbulb swung from the ceiling like a noose. Shadows swayed in the dim light. A pair of sleeping eyes snapped open, darting in confusion.

Night. Pain.

John Murdoch sat up—splashing.

Splashing?

He looked down. He was sitting in a tub of long-cold water. His eyes scanned the room. Everything was strange, unfamiliar. A dull ache pounded his skull.

Moving stiffly, he stepped out of the tub. He stumbled to a cracked wall mirror and peered into the foggy glass.

He didn't quite recognize the unkempt figure with deep, haunted eyes staring back at him. A dark red slash of blood ran across his face, from a point between his eyebrows. Instinctively he wiped it away and noticed the swollen pin-prick wound on his forehead. As if he'd been struck by a snake with one fang.

A cold shudder puckered his naked skin. He spotted a pile of clothes on a nearby chair and hurriedly put them on. He picked up a pair of shoes from beneath the chair. They were shiny, brand-new. And they fit.

Still wobbly, he left the bathroom unaware of the glass syringe lying broken at his feet.

As he emerged from the bathroom, his unsteady legs bumped a table, overturning a fishbowl. Glass and water spattered everywhere. A goldfish flopped on the floor, eyes bulging with panic.

Hands trembling, Murdoch clumsily scooped up the fish. He lurched back into the bathroom and tossed the slippery creature into the half-filled tub. It made a small splash.

Murdoch carefully entered the main room and looked around. He found a lamp and switched it on. The diffuse light revealed some nondescript furniture, a bed, chair, bureau—and a closet. He opened the closet and found a raincoat hanging inside. He slipped his hands into the pockets. One hand came out holding a gold key.

Without thinking, he searched through his own pockets and came up with yet another key, this one much larger. An oversized hotel key. Hard to misplace.

The room number on the key was 614. As he put the key in his trouser pocket Murdoch saw something at the back of the closet. A suitcase.

The leather was old and scuffed. He hefted it onto the rumpled bed and opened the lid. More clothes inside. The basic necessities: underwear, socks, a few shirts, a sweater, tie, jacket, trousers. Whoever packed left home in a hurry.

He pulled out a shirt and draped it across his chest. Perfect fit. Just like the one left in the bathroom. Rummaging deeper in the suitcase, he found a postcard.

"SHELL BEACH" it said on the front. The picture showed a sunny seaside town.

The postcard stirred his memory. Images flurried up like frightened birds.

A hot white beach. A little boy scrambling over soft sand . . . Laughing . . . Full of life . . .

He blinked. He was standing in the shadows of a cheap room staring at an old postcard.

A sudden jangle shattered the quiet. Hesitantly he reached for the phone and pressed the receiver to his ear.

"Who is this?" a high, nasal voice demanded.

The question confused Murdoch.

"What?"

"You *don't know,* do you?" the nasal voice whined. "Listen to me. I'm a doctor. I can help. But we have to get you out of there. They'll come for you soon—you must leave *now . . ."*

An electric chill prickled the hair on Murdoch's neck. Suddenly sensing another presence nearby, he turned and scanned the room. Then he saw it.

The dark, oily stain on the floor led to a bare white foot peeking around the bed.

Reluctantly he moved closer. A nude woman lay in a pool of blood, arms sprawled as if doing the backstroke. Her eyes stared lifelessly at the ceiling.

Murdoch's numbed fingers dropped the phone.

She had been gruesomely mutilated. Raw crimson gashes ripped her white flesh, inscribing grisly spirals.

"Are you there . . . ?"

The faint nasal voice roused Murdoch's stunned brain. He reached for the discarded phone and stopped. Six inches from the receiver lay a bloody knife. He started to pick it up then caught himself.

He didn't need the damned knife—he needed to get out of here. Now.

But at the last second he decided to take the knife and the suitcase with him. As he stepped into the dingy hallway his vision swayed and he grabbed the wall for support. A few deep breaths seemed to clear his head.

Clutching the suitcase tight, Murdoch staggered down the hallway.

"Ding!"

Far down the corridor an elevator door slid open.

Murdoch didn't wait to see who it was. He ducked down a stairway and vanished into the silence.

A dim patch of light at the base of the stairs guided his way to the lobby. When he entered, the first thing he saw was a woman propped inside a phone booth, eyes closed and mouth open, as if she'd dozed off in mid-conversation.

He opened the door and the woman rolled out, landing in a heap at his feet. Murdoch glanced over at the front desk. The manager was there, slumped over the registry book, dead asleep.

The large wall clock above the desk had stopped. Murdoch turned to leave, his footsteps muffled.

Just then the large clock began ticking. As the second hand swept down, the sounds of traffic punctured the quiet. Somewhere outside a siren was rising. Its wail was oddly comforting as he headed for the street.

"Hey!"

Murdoch paused and slowly turned around. The hotel manager glared at him, now wide awake.

"The automat called. Said you left your wallet there."

Murdoch gaped at him. "My . . . ?"

The squat manager peered disapprovingly through round glasses. *"Wallet,"* he repeated loudly. "I suggest you retrieve it since you only paid for three weeks—and they was up ten minutes ago."

Murdoch looked away. The phone booth woman was gingerly picking herself up, wondering how she got there. So was he.

He moved back to the desk. "I've been here *three weeks?"*

Briskly the manager flipped open the hotel ledger and found the page. "It's right here in black and white, Mr. Murdoch. Day and date." He pushed the ledger toward Murdoch. "We make our books like we make our beds, all neat and tidy."

Murdoch bent closer and scanned the page. There it was: "J. Murdoch." He glanced down. The initials on his suitcase were

completely different—"K. H."

He looked at the squat manager and patted his pocket. "I, uh—I'll take care of it when I get back."

Murdoch shuffled toward the door.

"See that you do," the manager shouted after him. "Only thing that makes you a 'guest' in this joint, pal, is cash on the barrelhead."

Once outside Murdoch went around the corner and found the service door. Not certain how he knew where to go, Murdoch descended the cramped stairs until he reached the boiler room.

Inside the furnace was blazing. Ignoring the heat, Murdoch took a rolled towel from under his coat. First he unwrapped the bloody knife. Using the towel, he opened the furnace hatch. Then he tossed both knife and towel into the raging flames.

Murdoch reached for the suitcase. For a moment he studied the "K. H." initials before he threw the suitcase onto the fire and kicked the hatch shut.

Afraid to leave, he crouched in the suddenly dark room as a surge of nausea seared his belly . . .

Far above the boiler room an elevator door slid open. The hotel manager got out and waddled along the hall, muttering to himself.

"House rules. Three weeks is three weeks. No days off for good behavior." He giggled and pulled out his master key. He stopped at room 614.

The manager slowly entered the dark room.

He stopped short when he saw the black shape crouching in the white bathroom. Shards of a broken syringe glinted in the dim light. Other shadows moved inside the bathroom, beyond the crouched figure.

The manager took a halting step back, his hand groping for the door. "Oh, I thought this was Mr. Murdoch's roo—"

A black-gloved hand suddenly closed around his throat. The fingers were cold beneath the leather—and strong. Relentlessly they squeezed tighter. The manager convulsively struggled for air. Then he felt the abrupt shock of being slammed against the wall and realized he could breathe again. Wheezing, the manager greedily gulped in air.

When he lifted his eyes the wheezing cut off. Choked with terror, the manager watched a tall, sinister figure come out of the bathroom.

Although still indistinct in the low light, the tall figure reacted oddly to the spilled water from the broken fishbowl. He shrank back and stepped a long way around the puddle. As if frightened by the

water.

The strange figure spoke, his voice metal-sharp.

“Mr. Murdoch, yes. Where is he?”

“He just left . . .” the manager rasped. “Not five minutes ago.”

A light came on.

Shivering, the manager saw three strangers standing in front of him. They seemed related, like overly inbred cousins. All three had bald, egglike skulls, smooth ivory skin, and wore long black coats.

Something moved in the corner of his vision.

A tiny hand reached up, pulling at the first stranger’s coat. The manager’s blood turned to ice when he saw the dwarflike figure. He was a miniature version of the three strangers. A child but not a child. Eyes as empty and pitiless as a reptile.

A child with a dagger in his small, white fist.

Cold fear froze the manager’s lungs. Unable to speak, he looked pleadingly at the leader.

“Sleep now,” the first stranger whispered.

The manager’s eyes rolled up in his head. His squat body slumped to the floor like a sack of Jell-O.

A moment later the strangers were gone, leaving him alone with the woman’s mutilated corpse.

2

The Limbo Room was a smoker's heaven.

A gray haze obscured the customers hunched over the bar and seemed to muffle the sounds. Jazz drifted from a small stage across the empty floor.

The three-piece band was subdued, blending sensual chords behind their young singer. Emma was a heartbreaker. Her silky voice and languid beauty transformed the bare black stage. She stood pinned by the spotlight like an Art Deco butterfly as her torch song faded.

A smattering of applause trailed Emma when she left the stage and headed for the dressing room.

"Hey, sweety . . ."

Emma paused at the familiar voice. She turned and saw Pauline's wide red smile. The club's cocktail waitress liked heavy lipstick. Her smile became apologetic as she handed Emma a white business card.

"I almost forgot. Said he was your husband's doctor. He wanted to speak with you."

Heart racing wildly, Emma stared at the card.

Dr. D. P. Schreber.

The name meant nothing. Emma didn't even know her husband had a doctor. Confusion, anger, and relief skidded across her brain. She hadn't seen or heard from John Murdoch for three weeks.

Dr. Schreber's office was located in an old-fashioned iron building with a grated elevator and cramped, badly lit corridors. Emma Murdoch reluctantly walked down the deserted hall, half tempted to turn around and go home. But she had to know where John was.

A yellow glow shone through a frosted-glass door at the end of the hall. The black lettering stenciled on the door read: Daniel Schreber—Psychiatrist.

Emma stepped tentatively into the sparsely furnished waiting area. There was no one to be seen. But the ornate double doors at the end of the room were ajar. Emma saw a light leaking through the massive doors and moved closer.

The room inside was crowded with books, papers, and an odd assortment of objects from animal skeletons to exotic beetles in glass boxes. The beetles were dead.

However, the rats scrambling inside the bizarre spiral-shaped maze that dominated the room were quite alive.

A myopic little mouse of a man with thick, steel-rimmed glasses hovered over the maze. His watery eyes glinted as he tormented the rats, lifting little latches to herd his terrified pets into various sections of the huge wire prison.

He looked like a feverish Nero presiding over some surreal gladiator pit.

Emma didn't want to step inside. She waited in the doorway until it was clear the intense little man hadn't heard her arrive.

"Excuse me."

Startled, the little man jerked his head around.

"The outer door was open," Emma said quickly. "I hope you don't mind." She glanced at the white card. "Doctor . . . ?"

The little man beamed. "Schreber. Daniel Schreber," he announced in a high nasal voice. "And *you* must be Emma Murdoch."

For a moment he stared at her through his bottle-lens glasses. Then he stood and waved her inside.

"Please come in," he said genially. "I appreciate your coming to see me on short notice, Mrs. Murdoch—I know how awkward this must seem . . ."

His nasal voice grated on Emma's taut nerves. She entered carefully, wishing she'd never come. He was a little too anxious. Too eager. Her eyes were drawn to the weird maze, the centerpiece of his cluttered sanctum.

"They're remarkably similar to us in some ways," Schreber mused, gazing proudly at his pets. "I often wonder if they realize they're part of an experiment . . ." He smiled gently at this last thought, as he lowered a panel to trap one particular rat.

A rush of impatience overcame Emma's fear.

"I'm a little confused here," she said curtly. "You say you're my husband's doctor—but he never mentioned you."

Schreber continued to play with his rats. "It's not unusual for a spouse to keep his or her treatment a secret. The truth is, Mrs. Murdoch, John has been seeing me for some time. That is, until recently."

The little man peered at her. "It's crucial I speak with him. Do you know where he is?"

"What's this about?" Emma demanded, suddenly suspicious.

Schreber smiled. "Forgive me. You deserve an explanation." He moved away from the maze and began to pace, apparently unsure of

where to begin.

“John had been grappling with feelings of betrayal,” the little man said finally. He paused to look at her. “Stemming from your . . . marital difficulties.”

Emma’s sensitive features crumbled, her confusion magnified by burning shame.

“You’ll think me insensitive, Mrs. Murdoch,” Schreber continued, staring at her intently, “but I fear the problem is somewhat larger than an incident of infidelity.”

Annoyed by his smug tone, Emma recovered her composure. What did he know about the dark side of love? About human passion? “And what, exactly, is the problem?” she challenged.

The little man regarded the maze. “It’s not we who have lost your husband—but rather he who has *lost himself.”* He squinted at Emma. “He appears to have suffered a psychotic break. I believe he has lost his memory.”

“That’s absurd,” Emma snapped. “John’s hardly the *forgetful* type, Doctor . . . and since he seems to have told you everything about our personal lives—you probably know he’s not very forgiving either.”

Despite her anger, Emma’s resistance was ebbing. The sad truth was, she had no other link to her husband.

The little man seemed to sense her weakening.

“I’m sorry for prying like this. It must be difficult for you, Emma. May I call you Emma?”

She nodded slowly. Suddenly it all came tumbling out. “I had an affair and John found out about it,” she said, eyes misting over. She lifted her chin defiantly. “But you already know that, don’t you? John packed a bag and left. I haven’t heard from my husband in three weeks now . . .”

Schreber met her troubled gaze. “Then for John’s sake we must work together. He is in a great deal of danger. He may be delusional, even violent. If he should contact you—and I suspect he will—you must call me immediately.”

Emma shrugged weakly, staring down at the maze with a kind of dread. Her eyes were fixed on the trapped rat, circling round and round, desperately searching for a way out.

Schreber seemed to read her thoughts.

“Wherever your husband is, Emma, *he’s searching*—for himself.”

Emma didn’t answer, her sculpted ivory features impassive as she watched the frenzied rat clawing at a metal door to nowhere . . .

The city's huge buildings blocked out the sky, creating endless canyons. A lone figure trudged along desolate streets where daylight had never been invented.

Wind pulled at Murdoch's coat. He tugged at his collar, muttering to himself. "Evening, Mr. Murdoch," he said mockingly, "what are you doing out on a night like this?" He laughed under his breath. "It is Mr. Murdoch, isn't it? Mr. J—something—Murdoch."

A sharp squeaking sound cut him off.

He paused and stared up at a large faded billboard high above the street. It featured a smiling woman against an ocean backdrop. The slogan read: Come to Shell Beach. The woman was waving. Her mechanized arm squeaked loudly as it swung back and forth. Waving at him.

Seductive. Beckoning.

Murdoch hesitated, then looked for the building's entrance. Once inside he found a stairway and began to climb.

It seemed to take hours until he finally stepped out onto the billboard's catwalk at the edge of the roof. The wind was blowing harder and he could feel the billboard shiver. The whole rickety structure seemed unstable. Behind him the grinning female on the beach kept waving at darkened skyscrapers. Her mechanical arm groaned as it swept great slow arcs like some giant metronome.

A cold gust slapped at his face. Why was he up here?

Murdoch scanned the streets far below. A gray concrete wasteland. Then he saw a flashing neon sign not far away: Food, Automat, Food, Automat. The sign sparked his memory.

Automat. The hotel man mentioned the automat. Another frigid gust of wind bit through his clothing. Freezing, he jammed his hands into his pockets—and felt something.

A thin sheaf of papers stuffed in the lining of his coat. With a curious sense of dread he pulled them out. They were some newspaper clippings.

Murdoch really didn't want to look at them. An acid sense of revulsion seared his belly as he started to read the clippings. He heard the arm's metallic groan above the wind whipping around his ears. The headlines screamed at him.

MANHUNT FOR MAD KILLER!
KILLER STRIKES AGAIN!
KILLER STALKS CITY'S STREETWALKERS

As Murdoch shuffled frantically from one clipping to the next the wind plucked them from his frozen fingers. Dizzy with shock, his legs

buckled and he fell to the floor.

Numbly he watched the clippings flutter across the catwalk, past the gleaming black shoes knifing out of the shadows. Someone was standing on the catwalk.

"So you have discovered where you fit in?"

The voice was tinny and distant, like an old seventy-eight recording.

Murdoch looked up. A tall, egg-skulled figure in a long black coat emerged from the darkness. His face was dead white.

"Who are you?" Murdoch rasped, struggling to his feet.

Mr. Hand. The name floated into Murdoch's brain.

Mr. Hand smiled gently. "We could ask you the same question."

Something about the stranger's reptilian eyes fogged Murdoch's thoughts. Dimly he was aware there were others. Other strangers like Mr. Hand.

They were coming up the stairs, their smooth, egglike skulls rising out of the darkness.

Mr. Hand's tinny voice pierced his consciousness.

"Sleep now."

Murdoch realized the command was intended for him, but something resisted. Fear, need, rage—*something.*

The strangers gathered behind Mr. Hand glanced at each other. Their hypnotic suggestion had no effect.

Murdoch felt their hatred. Mr. Hand lunged.

Raw instinct jerked Murdoch's limbs back. At the same moment his mind flashed like a high-tension wire. Power shuddered through his body.

Suddenly the rickety catwalk groaned and began to give way under Mr. Hand's feet. The stranger's pale, impassve face seemed almost puzzled as the rotten planks collapsed and he crashed through the catwalk, and went plummeting to the street far below.

Murdoch looked up and saw the others moving toward him. There were three of them. The most menacing looked like a child.

Three names bubbled up in his mind.

Mr. Wall. Mr. Quick. Mr. Sleep.

Murdoch backed away as far as he could. The strangers kept coming. They circled the jagged hole in the floor like three black cobras. Silent. Venomous.

Murdoch felt the flimsy rail at his back. He was cornered. Crazed with terror, he looked around wildly for a way out. The strangers edged closer, almost upon him.

Murdoch's eyes went wide. And suddenly, *so did the hole in the floor*

—which instantly expanded to engulf Mr. Wall, who was nearest its rim!

Mr. Wall threw his hands up as he lost his balance and dropped into the shaft—where some cables broke his fall, coiling around his neck and snapping it with a sharp click.

Squirming and twitching, he dangled there.

Above him the woman's mechanical arm waved cheerfully at the universe.

Mr. Quick and Mr. Sleep paused, staring at Murdoch with awe.

Mr. Quick's voice sliced the darkness.

"He can Tune!"

Something glinted in Mr. Sleep's hand. Dagger slashing, the child struck.

Murdoch feinted and snatched up a piece of broken wood. He jabbed at the ghostly child, feet shuffling near the edge. Then his skin went cold.

A shadow loomed into view and Mr. Hand rose up beside him like a dark angel—levitating himself back onto the catwalk. Murdoch shrank back too late.

With surprising force Mr. Hand lunged, driving Murdoch into the yawning abyss. Clawing frantically as he fell, Murdoch hooked his fingers onto the edge. He swung wildly in the darkness, screams smothered by sheer terror.

Above him the woman beckoned seductively.

Mr. Quick's white face peered over the edge, his blank, crescent eyes staring down at Murdoch.

Through the icy fear Murdoch felt his mind flex. The billboard girl's arm began to wave crazily, chopping down very close to Mr. Quick. As the arm descended, Mr. Quick lifted his head—right into the swift, downward path of the mechanical arm.

The heavy arm smacked Mr. Quick's head and he crumpled, his skull crushed.

Murdoch heaved himself onto the catwalk, gauging the distance between the stairs and the remaining attackers.

But the strangers were backing away, seemingly horrified. Murdoch followed their gaze to the body at his feet.

Mr. Quick's skull lay cracked open like the eggshell it resembled. It was hollow inside, as if someone had scooped out the brain matter and replaced it with clockwork gears.

A rustling movement drew Murdoch's eye.

Revulsion and disbelief collided in his belly as he watched a huge

black insect crawl out of Mr. Quick's ruined head—where it had been piloting his body.

The shiny wet creature slithered onto the catwalk like black mercury. Then it squealed. High and discordant.

Its alien cry wound tight around Murdoch's mind as he watched the creature writhing in agony. Suddenly it screeched like a violin strung with strangler's wire.

And died.

At that moment Murdoch felt a shudder deep inside. Very deep and very powerful, like some icy volcano erupting from the base of his bowels. He glanced up and saw the surviving strangers trembling violently.

Their hands were clutching their heads *as if they could feel their comrade's pain.*

Seizing the moment, Murdoch scrambled past them to the stairs. With reckless frenzy he hurtled blindly down, down, down the dark, crooked stairway—terrified of what he'd see if he ever looked back . . .

3

Inspector Frank Bumstead had the soul of a concert artist. Alone in his apartment he played a hauntingly beautiful melody on his piano accordion. His long fingers danced skillfully across the keyboard, coaxing divine music from the ornate instrument.

The accordion sparkled, like the rest of his apartment. Books were stacked with utter precision. All his furniture was covered. And plastic runners protected his immaculate white carpet.

Frank was also neatly attired, his broad shoulders draped in a custom-tailored shirt. Head bent, he intensified his music, climbing from chord to glorious chord.

The phone's rude jangle shut down his song.

Wearily Frank wiped away the tears spilling from his pale blue eyes and reached for the call he knew meant trouble.

The hotel lobby's fluorescent lights tinted everyone's skin a sickly green. Inspector Frank Bumstead methodically checked his watch when he entered.

Fifteen minutes since he got the call. Not bad. But Chief Inspector Stromboli would complain anyway. Frank paused to brush some lint from the shoulder of his tailored jacket before proceeding to the desk.

As he approached, uniformed cops were questioning a tall, thin hotel manager wearing a cheap blue suit.

"Listen," the hotel manager said flatly, "I told the guy—cash on the barrelhead, three weeks is three weeks."

Bumstead cut in. "So where's our lucky winner?"

One of the cops pointed to the ceiling. "Upstairs, sir. Room 614. Another hooker."

Bumstead leaned over the reception desk and examined the numbered key compartments. Number 614 was empty.

He swiveled the hotel ledger around on the counter and flipped through the pages. He found the room number he was looking for—and the name it was registered under.

Room 614 . . . J. Murdoch.

"J. Murdoch . . ." Bumstead repeated softly, as if the name might have some meaning.

A young, uniformed cop with pink skin emerged from the inner office where he'd been poking around. Bumstead recognized Husslebeck but the young cop didn't notice him at the desk.

"Evening, Husslebeck," he snapped. "Lace is untied."

Momentarily startled, Husslebeck stiffened. Then he saw his shoelace was indeed loose.

"Inspector Bumstead, sir," he said with visible relief. "Am I glad you're here, sir." He bent to tie his shoelace. "They say Detective Walenski's got the heebie-jeebies . . ."

"I just take what they give me," Bumstead said coldly.

Husslebeck's neck reddened. Obviously he'd hit a sore point. He nodded and fumbled with his shoelace.

Jaw clenched, Bumstead headed up the stairs. Husslebeck followed sheepishly.

When they reached 614 one lone cop was inside, dusting for prints. Bumstead and Husslebeck entered single file, stepping gingerly around the dead woman.

"Who said all hotel rooms look alike?" Bumstead muttered. He knelt beside the corpse and carefully traced his finger above the bizarre spiral wounds sliced into her flesh.

"Round and round she goes, where she stops, nobody knows . . ." He stood up and wearily shook his head. "Third one this week. Just like clockwork. What's that make so far, Husslebeck? Six chippies in all?"

"I believe so, sir," Husslebeck ventured.

Bumstead whistled softly. "Gotta give the man an A for effort."

"Bumstead!" someone barked. "What took you?"

Bumstead knew the voice. And the routine. He turned to see a short, surly detective in a silk suit stroll out of the bathroom with a forensics expert.

Chief Inspector Stromboli scowled and made a beeline for Bumstead.

"Have you been reading the papers?" Stromboli greeted him acidly. "They're *massacring* us. This killer's been running circles around us—thanks to Walenski."

"With all due respect, Chief Inspector, I've known Eddie a long time. He's a good cop—"

Stromboli cut him off. "Listen, Bumstead, whatever kind of cop Walenski once was, he let drift a long time ago—when a bottle started to look better than a badge."

The stubby chief inspector stormed off, leaving Bumstead to ponder

his errors.

Bumstead sighed and turned his attention to the broken fishbowl. The trail of footprints was still damp on the frayed carpet leading to the bathroom.

He peeked inside. A policeman was splashing his hand in the tub, trying to catch the goldfish Murdoch had tossed there—in order to place it carefully into a bucket.

"So, Husslebeck," Bumstead mused, "what kind of *killer* stops to save a dying fish?"

"You got me, sir."

The forensics expert who was crouched beside the corpse looked up. "He doesn't even bother to rape them at any point."

Bumstead frowned. That didn't sound right.

"I mean, the thing is . . ." The forensics expert searched for the right words. "Usually with a knife they display a little more . . . *emotion.*" He gestured at the dead woman. "Look how *precise* these wounds are —almost surgical in nature."

The expert studied the body for a few more moments then looked at Bumstead. "Too bad about Walenski, huh? Just when things were picking up."

Bumstead shrugged. "Guess he's seen enough."

A shrill cry outside jerked his head up. Everyone turned as the sounds of a commotion came closer. Shouting. Scuffling. Stomping.

Uniformed cops were running up and down the hallway, yelling as they chased a wild-haired, glassy-eyed lunatic. Bumstead saw them all run past the door then suddenly the lunatic burst into the room!

Flailing and ranting, the lunatic lurched violently around the small room smashing everything in his path.

Bumstead fingered his gun but he knew he wouldn't shoot. Finally three cops cornered the lunatic, and wrestled him to the floor.

Cuffing him wasn't easy, even with three cops. The lunatic was powerfully built and totally out of control. He lashed, kicked, twisted, and butted in an effort to get free, screaming breathlessly as he fought.

"There's no way out! Oh, God, don't you see?"

Stromboli and the others seemed disgusted by the display. But Bumstead just watched impassively. As if it were all happening on stage.

Husslebeck emerged from the bathroom as the cops dragged the still-struggling lunatic outside.

The young cop glanced at Bumstead questioningly.

"Who was that?"

Bumstead continued to stare at the door.

"Walenski," he said quietly.

Deep in the bowels of the city, the Strangers were gathered in the Central Chamber. A relentless ticking echoed across the vast silent hall while long, dark silhouettes webbed the shadows.

Alien shapes pierced the gloom at grotesque angles as the reedy figures labored at their ominous tasks. Gnarled, spidery hands worked furiously assembling children's toys; cutting and pasting images from family photographs; creating personal diaries—fabricating lives that never existed . . .

Mute. Efficient. They fed their arcane machinery, stamping out artificial memories unique to the human species.

Manufacturing human souls.

Nowhere else in the universe did bestial hungers, inspired passions, and magical visions coexist with the empty logic of survival.

Nowhere else in the universe was there music.

Only the life-forms clinging to this obscure, decaying fragment had the power. Only they were blessed with dreams.

The Strangers coveted the human spirit the way Lucifer envied God. So they had come to possess it.

Their monotonous routine shifted abruptly when three of their council entered the chamber—Mr. Wall, Mr. Sleep, and Mr. Hand.

Mr. Wall looked much the same as he did before being garroted by the steel cables below the billboard. Of course he *should* have been dead—his neck *was* broken during the scuffle with Murdoch—but he appeared to be fine.

Some of the strangers stood and circled the newcomers.

"What is to be done?" one of them demanded. "This man is dangerous. Yes?"

"It is said he is able to *Tune,"* another confided.

Voices rose in protest. "Impossible!"

The first one remained unmoved. "An anomaly, yes!"

Mr. Hand nodded gravely. "We have seen it with our own eyes."

There was a general murmur of concern. Mr. Hand tried to reassure them. "On occasion the imprinting does not take," he explained. "They behave erratically when they awake—we find them wandering like lost children—but this one was different, yes. This one *surprised* us."

“What does the doctor have to say about this?” the first Stranger inquired.

Mr. Hand seemed disturbed by the question. “The doctor . . . he has failed to report in.”

“And Mr. Quick?” another asked.

Mr. Wall lifted his hands and made a slicing motion.

“No more Mr. Quick. Mr. Quick *dead,* yes.” He looked at Mr. Hand as if he were somehow responsible.

“Poor, poor Mr. Quick,” someone said.

Mr. Hand looked around. “Mr. Book—does he know?”

From their shocked expressions Mr. Hand realized he’d transgressed. And he knew fear.

Because a silhouetted figure in the archway was hobbling into view —Mr. Book.

The tall, narrow-chested figure dressed in a long black coat was much like the others. Except he was ancient. Mr. Book’s wrinkled white skull and crescent eyes resembled an albino turtle. A snapping turtle.

As Mr. Book lifted his cane some Strangers cringed, awed by his presence.

But Mr. Hand stood his ground. “We had hoped to understand more —before sharing with you.”

“We can know nothing until we *possess* him, yes!” Mr. Book reminded venomously.

For a moment there was only the steady tick of an unseen clock chopping at the gloom.

Mr. Hand felt his link to them shrivel. It was worse than pain. Numbly he watched Mr. Book point his cane at someone.

“Mr. Night . . .”

A knife-thin figure emerged from the shadows.

“. . . you will take the east,” Mr. Book ordered.

Immediately the Stranger moved off, trailed by his cadre.

“Mr. Face, you the west,” the ancient one continued. “Mr. Glove, the south. Mr. Shade, the north.”

The wrinkled leader surveyed them with shiny lizard eyes. *“We must have this man!”*

From the shadows Mr. Hand watched in sullen silence as the designated trackers filed out of the huge chamber, followed by their cohorts. Mr. Hand knew his fate.

If they failed to locate Murdoch, Mr. Book would make him dead, *yes.*

4

His fingertips.

Funny how he'd never noticed before, Murdoch thought, intently studying his fingers under the harsh glare of a streetlight.

Spiral fingerprints. Just like the wounds on the corpse.

The connection chilled his skin. Frightened, he glanced around the deserted street. He saw a truck approaching and lowered his head as it rumbled past.

When he looked up he spotted the neon sign.

Automat.

Murdoch quickened his pace. As he approached the Automat he saw a sultry young woman in a satin skirt and net stockings, leaning against the building. She acknowledged Murdoch with a painted smile.

Murdoch moved past, avoiding her eyes. He didn't trust prostitutes.

Gratefully he stepped into the brightly lit restaurant and looked around. There were a few tables scattered about—and a wall of gleaming window slots.

Each glass compartment contained a separate food item: lima beans, noodles with tomato sauce, slices of meat loaf, pieces of stale pie, glasses of milk. It looked like a fast-food museum.

There were no employees in sight. Just the endless rows of slots.

A nondescript customer drifted to the slots, put in his coins, and removed a plate with a banana on it. He picked up the banana, dropped the plate on a stack of empties, put the banana in his pocket, and left.

Immediately someone behind the scenes refilled the vacant slot with a bowl of Jell-O.

"Hello?" Murdoch hurried to the spot. "Hello?"

A disembodied voice from behind the wall of food slots answered him.

"Oh, it's you."

"Yes," Murdoch said, breathless with relief. "Yes, it's *me.*"

"Ya left your wallet here, buddy."

"When? When did I do that?" Murdoch began to bob and weave, peering through the slots.

"When you was last here."

"When was that?"

The voice became exasperated. "When you left your wallet! You expect me to remember?"

A sharp *clack* ended the discussion.

Sudden activity in a nearby slot drew Murdoch to the window. Just behind the glass was a wallet.

He tried to retrieve it but the window was locked. Frustrated, he dug through his pockets for coins. All he found were pennies.

"Excuse me?" Murdoch called.

No answer.

Murdoch jiggled the handle. "Hello?"

A bell tinkled. Murdoch turned at the sound of the door opening. Two policemen entered, laughing as they took the booth nearest the door.

Murdoch returned his attention to the locked window. He jiggled the handle harder. "Hello?"

The silence was magnified by the policemen's presence behind him. He could feel their eyes. Anxiety collided with frustration as he intently tried to force the handle. Furious, he glared at the locked window.

Energy pulsed from spine to brain.

Sproing! Like magic the latch cracked apart, spewing a spring. The window clicked—and popped open.

Hand shaking, Murdoch snared the wallet and turned to leave. He kept his head down as he hurried to the door.

One of the cops extended his billy club, cutting Murdoch off. "Where ya headed, chief?"

"Home," Murdoch said quietly.

The cop sneered. "Oh, yeah? Where's home?"

"Uh . . ." Murdoch clutched the wallet, afraid of what might happen. What he might do. He felt his fear stoking the power. *Inciting* it.

The door tinkled. The sultry prostitute entered and hooked Murdoch's arm.

"Haven't you mugs got anything better to do?" she scolded.

The cop shrugged. "Just tryin' to do my job, May."

"Yeah, well, there's a killer out there, case you hadn't noticed," May said sarcastically. "Maybe you should be out looking for him instead of cooling your heels, huh?"

The cop lowered his club. “Ah, go on.”

May tugged at Murdoch’s arm, leading him outside.

Once on the street May paused and ran a teasing finger down his chest. Murdoch hesitated. He glanced back at the two cops, who were still watching them.

“Do we . . . *know* each other, miss?”

May laughed softly, as if he were joking.

“Follow me,” she whispered, playing the game. “We can get . . . acquainted.”

Warily Murdoch allowed her to lead him into the alley. May started up a flight of stairs to her apartment above the Automat.

Murdoch watched her climb. Long, fluid legs. Sensual hips. Liquidy curves.

Doglike, he followed.

Despite his confusion and terror, Murdoch sensed the sexual energy. And the danger.

He paused in the shadows outside May’s door, teetering between going inside or taking his chances on the street. Grisly images of spiral wounds circled his mind. Murdoch had a premonition something horrible was about to happen.

He didn’t trust prostitutes.

He didn’t trust himself.

5

The name on the frosted-glass door read: Detective Walenski.

Inside it was Inspector Frank Bumstead's version of hell. The place was an unholy mess. Files of paperwork were everywhere; on the desk, chairs, stacked up on the floor. In between were dozens of used coffee cups, moldy food in greasy brown bags, and unopened butter squares oozing through their wrappers. The walls were covered with yellowed newspaper articles.

"I'm being punished for my sins, right?" Bumstead muttered.

Husslebeck didn't answer.

"What did I ever do to inherit this?" Bumstead went on, surveying the filthy office. "I don't even know where to begin."

The young cop idly riffled through the files on the desk. "Everything Detective Walenski committed to paper should be here . . ."

Bumstead shot Husslebeck an annoyed look as he navigated the obstacle course of junk to Walenski's filing cabinet. He pulled open a drawer and reached in.

Snap!

"Yaaaah!" Bumstead jumped back, shaking his hand.

A *mousetrap* had caught his fingers. Cursing, he pryed it off and threw it onto the littered floor.

Still cursing, Bumstead swept his arm to clear a space on the desk and set down one of the file folders. Brow furrowed, he began reading.

He couldn't believe it.

Nothing but incomprehensible scribblings verging on hieroglyphics—police reports turned into abstract art.

Page after page after page.

"What the hell were you thinking, Eddie?" Bumstead muttered. He shook his head and tossed the file aside. A rookie cop appeared in the doorway.

"Sir." The cop kept his eyes averted, obviously uncomfortable—as if Walenski's breakdown were a virus like the flu. "We just got the fingerprint results in . . ."

Bumstead took the results from the cop and examined them.

Again, he couldn't believe it. He could get his mind around Walenski's madness but this was too bizarre.

“This some kind of joke?” He snorted.

The rookie cop backed up a step but Bumstead wasn’t talking to him. Surprise and revulsion hammered at his brain as he stared at the enlarged fingerprint.

A perfect spiral.

Exactly like the spiral pattern carved into the bodies of six murdered prostitutes.

Bumstead’s office was exactly like Walenski’s; twelve by fifteen, frosted door, no window. There the resemblance ended.

Unlike Walenski’s trash-bin environment, Bumstead’s work space was a cathedral of efficiency—and above all, neatness.

Still troubled by the fingerprint results, Bumstead retreated to his sanctuary with Husslebeck in subservient pursuit, carrying an enormous stack of files.

A woman’s voice stopped Bumstead short of the door. He turned and saw a stunning young woman standing in the hall. She had the face of a Modigliani painting and the grace of a Degas dancer.

“Inspector Bumstead . . . ?”

He nodded.

“I came here to file a missing-person report—for my husband.”

Bumstead sighed. Beautiful or not, he had no time for damsels in distress.

“Take it to the front desk,” he advised gruffly.

“But they told me to see *you,”* the woman said, moving closer. “His name is John Murdoch.”

This isn’t my day, Bumstead thought. Or maybe it was. He opened his door and ushered the woman inside.

Bumstead served coffee while he listened to Emma Murdoch’s story. It was thin.

He watched her sipping her cup like a lost waif. But not as lost as her husband.

“Mrs. Murdoch, why didn’t you report this before?” he asked casually, checking her reaction. “I mean, if he’s been missing as long as you say.”

She shrugged as if the answer were obvious. “I thought he’d simply walked out on me, Inspector. But when the doctor contacted me this evening . . .” Her voice trailed off and she stared into her cup.

Bumstead passed her a page with six names on it.

“Do any of these names mean anything to you?”

She glanced at them briefly. “No. Who are these women?” Slowly it dawned on her and her dark eyes blazed with anger. “Why are *you* looking for my husband? Are you going to accuse him of something?”

“Maybe,” Bumstead said quietly. “Maybe murder.”

“Which murder?”

He shrugged. “All of them.”

Emma just looked at him, appalled. Then she abruptly got up, desperate to leave.

“Mrs. Murdoch—wait!” Bumstead said hurriedly. “I’m sorry if I alarmed you.”

Emma paused at the door. “I’m sorry I came. We both made a mistake!”

She rushed frantically down the hall.

This just isn’t my day, Bumstead groaned, sprinting after her.

Far across the city, in her apartment above the Automat, May was doing what she did best. Seducing men.

She pointed to her worn velvet couch.

Murdoch nodded uncomfortably.

“Have a seat,” May whispered. “I’ll be right out.”

She smiled and turned on some music. Slow, slow, don’t rush him.

Murdoch watched her disappear behind a beaded curtain. Distractedly he wandered around the apartment. It was lit like a cocktail lounge. He noticed a teddy bear on the floor. Without thinking, he picked it up and placed it gently on the couch.

Perhaps he’d be better off outside, Murdoch speculated. But he had no place to go. Locked in thought, he didn’t notice the old wooden screen against the other doorway.

Or the slight movement behind a crack in the screen.

Then he remembered. Murdoch sat on the couch and pulled out the wallet. He flipped it open and saw a small photo of a breathtaking young woman. Somehow he knew her name: *Emma.* How did he know?

“Have we met before?” Murdoch asked the girl in the picture. “If we have, I hope you’re still breathing . . .”

Still searching, Murdoch found an ID card in the wallet bearing the name John Murdoch—and a corresponding address.

His heart pumped faster.

Now he had somewhere to go.

“Did you say something, honey?” May called from the other room.

Her voice was husky. Insinuating.

Murdoch stood, drawn to the beaded curtain. As he neared he saw May disrobing in front of the mirror.

Her full breasts were the color of moonlight. Sensing his gaze, she turned and smiled.

Murdoch glanced away. “I was just thinking,” he said awkwardly. “What you do seems pretty dangerous right now. I mean, how do you know *I’m* not the killer?”

“I *don’t*—but a girl’s got to live.” May’s grin tilted wickedly. “Why? You feeling any urges I should know about?”

Murdoch stepped back, feeling somehow trapped. The air in the tiny apartment was stifling.

Aware Murdoch had left the doorway, May quickly slipped into her silk robe. Black silk. It never failed.

“So what’s your name, honey?” she called, freshening her lipstick.

No answer.

Still smiling, May stepped through the curtains.

“I said, what’s your . . .”

The gaudy living room was empty, the front door swinging shut. He was gone.

May’s smile dissolved. “Ahh—*shoot!”*

Across the room, a watchful eye blinked through the cracked screen . . .

Murdoch didn’t have long to wait.

Less than ten minutes after he got to the address on the ID card, a car pulled up.

From where he stood, Murdoch couldn’t see the impeccable interior of Inspector Bumstead’s car. But he could clearly make out Emma’s exquisite face behind the windshield.

The man driving was rather handsome. Murdoch felt a strange twinge of jealousy.

Suddenly he was afraid they’d see him. His eyes widened and he felt an electric surge whip through his body.

The street lamp flickered and went out.

6

Bumstead carefully pulled his car in front of Emma Murdoch's apartment house. As he put the gear in park Emma was aware of the car's ordered interior: Thermos, notepad holder, gun rack. Everything fastidiously in its place.

Just like his damned office, Emma noted, fuming.

"You have it all wrong about my husband, Inspector," she said, trying to control her emotions.

Bumstead nodded slowly. "Yeah, well, I'll let you know as soon as I find out—either way."

His casual dismissal infuriated her. She stared at him, fumbling for the latch. She got out, slammed the door, and stormed into her building without glancing back.

Emma was still seething when she reached her apartment. It wasn't much, just enough for a young couple of modest means: fold-down bed, kitchenette tucked behind a countertop, a few showbiz photos.

But at that moment it seemed like a queen's palace. Exhausted, she left a trail of clothes as she headed for the luxury of a hot shower.

Twenty minutes later she emerged from the steamy bathroom, toweling her hair dry. Then she stopped.

Her breath froze in her throat. A gray plume of smoke curled out of the shadows, where someone was sitting.

A heartbeat later she realized who it was.

". . . John!"

Murdoch held up the key he'd found in his pocket. He looked at the key, then at Emma. "I guess I live here," he said softly. He regarded his cigarette and smiled. "My brand, I hope?"

Emma wasn't amused. "Of *course* you live here. John—where have you been? I've been worried sick about you."

She bent to embrace him, then paused. There was something foreign in his expression. Wary.

"You're supposed to be my wife?"

The question cut like a blade. "Supposed to be? It's *me,* John—Emma."

Murdoch glanced around, taking in the fragments of his alleged history. Pictures, knick-knacks; somehow it all failed to strike a chord. *Nothing* seemed familiar. Including the damp-haired female staring at

him.

“A man should remember his own wife, don’t you think?” he muttered.

Conflicting emotions prodded Emma’s memory.

“Your doctor called me—he was afraid this would happen. I didn’t really believe him . . . I—”

“Doctor . . . ?” Murdoch seemed confused.

“Yes, he gave me his card. He’s desperate to find you . . .” Emma reached for her purse and began digging through it. She found the card and handed it to Murdoch.

“Schreber . . .” The name didn’t ring any bells. Nothing did. The man without a past. Murdoch got up and began pacing nervously. He paused at the window and stared down at the darkened street below.

“This is insane,” he whispered. “It’s like I’m living out someone else’s nightmare.”

Murdoch turned, hollow-eyed and desperate.

“What happened to me? Why was I seeing a doctor?”

Emma’s eyes brimmed with tears. “You were angry because of what happened between us.” She glanced away. “Maybe we fell out of love—I was lonely . . . I . . .”

She took a deep breath and moved closer, reaching out to touch him. “We both made some mistakes.”

When he didn’t respond Emma withdrew her hand.

“John, the police are looking for you,” she said carefully, watching his reaction. “I told them there had to be a mistake. They think that you . . .”

Murdoch gave her a bitter smile. “I know. I saw the papers. ‘Killer Stalks City’s Streetwalkers!’ ”

His smile faded. “I was with one of those women before I came here tonight.”

Suddenly alarmed, Emma pulled back.

“No. Just hear me out,” he said quickly. “I met her outside an automat.” He paused, struggling to explain.

“I wanted to test myself. I *had* to. Do you understand?” he asked intently. “I needed to know if I had it in me to do those things.”

Emma nodded, unable to speak.

“Maybe I *am* crazy. Maybe I *have* lost my mind. But whoever I am I’m still *me*—and I’m not a killer.”

Tears streaming down her face, Emma stretched out her arms.

Stiffly, Murdoch allowed her to embrace him. He *felt* her belief in him. Although he was unable to respond with any conviction—he was

touched by *her* conviction.

"I believe you," she said fervently.

Murdoch pulled back. "You do? Why?"

"Because . . ." Emma groped for words. "Because I *know* you." Stung by his coldness, she turned away. "John, if this is your way of punishing me for being unfaithful, I don't blame you. I can't change what happened."

But he wasn't listening. He was peeking through the window curtain, body tensed.

"Wha . . . ?"

Murdoch raised a warning hand. "That car down there," he whispered. "There was someone in it when I arrived."

Emma moved beside him. Inspector Bumstead's car was still parked in front of her building. Murdoch caught her look of recognition and pounced.

"I thought you said you believed in me?"

His accusing tone was like an icepick. Emma tried to explain but she knew it was useless. "He's an inspector. He dropped me off. I didn't know he was still here."

Her dark, glistening eyes implored him to believe her.

Murdoch gave her a mocking smile.

"Save it—I'm not buying."

He moved to the door and cautiously stepped out into the hall. As he headed for the stairwell, Emma started after him.

"John . . ."

The words froze in her mouth when she saw Inspector Bumstead step in front of them. His pale blue eyes were steady, as was the revolver in his hand.

It was aimed directly at John.

"Stop right there, mister," Bumstead said calmly.

Instinctively Emma stepped between them, shielding her husband. "Wait a minute—*please*—you've got the wrong man."

Bumstead's revolver wavered. "Maybe, maybe not. I just want to talk."

Behind her, Murdoch gauged the distance to the stairwell. He'd lost his past—he wasn't about to give up the future.

"What if I'm being set up here?" Murdoch challenged. "Isn't that even remotely possible?"

"Right now all you are is a *suspect,* Murdoch," Bumstead said, voice low and soothing. "Turn yourself in. I'll listen to whatever you got to say."

“You wouldn’t believe what I’ve got to say.” Murdoch shifted, keeping Emma between them. “What’s been happening to me . . .”

Bumstead gripped his revolver with two hands and edged closer. “Try me.”

Heart booming, Emma lifted her hands as the two men circled around her.

“There’s someone else after me,” Murdoch rasped. “A group of men—they’re trying to kill me. They’re not even . . .”

He stopped himself. Bumstead shot Emma a quick glance but Murdoch caught it.

“Like I said.” Murdoch snorted. “Who wants to listen to a madman?” He gave Emma a bitter smile. “Guess we’ll have to find out how mad I am, then.”

Bumstead could feel him about to spring. He shuffled closer, but Emma moved to block him.

“Mrs. Murdoch, *stand aside!”* Bumstead yelled as Murdoch broke for the stairwell. Emma darted after him.

“No one ever listens to me,” Bumstead muttered, charging down the stairway.

The inspector tried to barrel through but Emma did her best to impede him as Murdoch leaped the stairs. Cursing, Bumstead knocked Emma aside and fired two quick shots at Murdoch’s departing heels.

The gunshots rang in Bumstead’s ears as he scrambled down to the next landing, breath coming in ragged gasps. He glimpsed Murdoch round a corner and fired again.

Brang! The bullet hit a metal pipe and caromed off the wall, narrowly missing Murdoch as he ducked into a darkened storage room.

Frantically Murdoch spun around.

Dead end. No way out.

Bumstead’s heavy footsteps were rapidly approaching. Another few seconds and he’d be there. Panic buzzed through Murdoch’s brain. Then he felt it.

An electric wave lashed from spine to brain, raising the hairs on his neck.

Murdoch blinked in disbelief.

A door stood before him on the opposite wall—*where there wasn’t one before.*

Though stunned, Murdoch had no time to question. He bolted through the door, slammed it shut behind him and raced down the alley into the shadows . . .

Gun ready, Bumstead charged headlong into the storage room. He skidded to a stop and looked around.

Empty.

Bumstead shook his head. The space was little more than a closet—there was absolutely no place Murdoch could hide.

Then he noticed something on the floor. Bumstead slowly bent over and picked it up; It was a business card. He squinted at the name.

Dr. D. P. Schreber.

7

The stark iron building had a dull sheen in the moonless night. A yellow cab turned onto the empty street and squealed to a stop.

Murdoch slowly got out and approached the building cautiously. He entered a cramped, badly lit lobby and scanned the building directory.

Caged elevator doors suddenly slid open behind him. A uniformed operator sat on a stool, waiting.

Murdoch stepped inside. “Six, please.”

The operator closed the cage and shifted a gleaming brass lever. As the elevator began to rise Murdoch noticed the operator’s corner. In a pathetic attempt to personalize the area a few mementos were taped to the wall. Among the mementos was a *faded photo of a woman at the beach.*

“Hey—” Murdoch blurted out suddenly, “do you happen to know where Shell Beach is?”

The operator’s bland features brightened and he gave Murdoch a proud smile. “You kiddin’? Me and the Missus spent our honeymoon there. You just take . . .” He seemed suddenly puzzled. “Or is it . . . ?”

The operator shook his head. “Hmm. That’s funny . . . Can’t seem to remember . . .”

Murdoch hoped he remembered the floor number.

When they reached their destination the operator slid open the cage door with a flourish. Murdoch stepped out into a narrow hall. Most of the occupants had gone for the night, leaving their offices dark. Murdoch checked the names on the doors as he moved down the shadowy hall.

“Say, who you looking for this time of night, buddy?” the operator called.

Murdoch turned. “Dr. Schreber.”

The operator seemed amused. “You won’t find him here,” he said smugly. “He went out for his evening swim. You might catch him if you hurry . . .”

As Murdoch walked back to the elevator he wondered if he was being set up. He stepped inside the cage and watched the doors slide shut.

Dr. Schreber floated in the tepid water like a large white mouse. He

felt safe here. The Strangers had an aversion to water.

Convenient too. The bathhouse was located in the basement of his building. Its oversized heated pool was a throwback to a more self-indulgent era.

A voice came over the PA system to announce closing time. Dr. Schreber ignored it. He continued to paddle around as the other swimmers climbed from the pool.

He needed relief from the inhuman pressure. He needed to feel safe. From them.

Dr. Schreber watched the last few patrons exit. The area was now devoid of life. Steam rose from the warm water as if it were a tiled swamp.

Holding the ladder for support, he rested for a moment. The brief swim had sapped his strength.

A long, thin shadow moved across the white wall behind him.

"Dr. Schreber."

Schreber spun around, startled, eyes blinking rapidly. He stifled a cry of fright as Mr. Hand emerged from the steamy darkness.

"Most unfortunate it is that we were forced to seek you out here," Mr. Hand said, flat voice echoing. "You know how uncomfortable all this *moisture* is for us."

Timidly Dr. Schreber paddled away from the ladder into deeper water—where Mr. Hand could not follow . . .

Outside, near the entrance, the cleaning lady intently mopped the floor. She heard faint sounds from the pool but she knew Dr. Schreber always stayed overtime.

Then she heard another noise. She glanced back but there was nothing. Only the door swinging shut as if disturbed by a gust of wind. She returned to work, mindful of her schedule.

Murdoch eased out of the shadows past the cleaning lady and made his way to the dressing room. All the lockers were empty except one. A black medical bag rested on a bench in front of it.

Without hesitating, Murdoch opened the bag.

Squinting in the half-light, he examined the bag's contents. Nothing but a collection of empty syringes. Like the broken syringe in the hotel.

An image of the woman's mutilated corpse spilled across his memory like acid.

Then a faint echo roused his attention. Senses alert, he moved toward the voices drifting from the pool area. Murdoch froze when he saw the speaker.

It was the tall, ghost-faced creature who tried to kill him on the catwalk. Mr. Hand.

There was also someone in the pool. A pasty-faced, nervous little man. *But human,* Murdoch thought. Probably Dr. Schreber.

He was oddly relieved. At least he knew he wasn't insane. Mr. Hand and the other Strangers did exist.

And they wanted him dead.

"I'm sorry," the nervous swimmer was saying, voice cracking. "I . . ."

"Failed to report in, yes," Mr. Hand finished.

"I was frightened," the swimmer pleaded. "I have a weak heart, you know."

The tall, egg-skulled figure was unmoved.

"Your weakness is not, we think, an affair of the heart."

Mr. Hand stared at Schreber like a python regarding a white rabbit.

"Must we reproduce Mr. Murdoch's memories *again?"*

The nervous little man in the pool paddled away from the ladder into deep water. "Yes," he gulped. "I tried Imprinting him but he woke up! Knocked the syringe right out of my hand. I tried to stop him . . ."

Hearing his name, Murdoch edged closer. That's how the syringe got broken, he thought feverishly. Which meant the nervous little man had been in the hotel room.

Suddenly he jostled a laundry basket. The wheels made a faint squeak.

Murdoch froze. He saw Mr. Hand turn and peer into the shadowy dressing room. After a few moments Mr. Hand resumed his conversation.

"He has . . . *no* memories, then."

"Only fragments," the little man said quickly. "The procedure was interrupted." He tried to smile as he struggled to keep his head up. "I suppose it's just a matter of rounding him up. I mean, you *have* had strays before . . ."

"This is no stray, Doctor. This one can *Tune."*

The word hung in the silence.

Dr. Schreber seemed shocked. "But I thought only *you* had that ability."

Mr. Hand drew closer to the pool's edge. "You will process another template of the subject's memories, yes."

"Of course, of course, you'll want to imprint him again."

"No," Mr. Hand said sharply. A faint whisper of a smile stole across his impassive features. "We require them for *another use."*

The black-clad Stranger glanced at the clock hanging above the pool. Then he leaned in closer, fixing the nervous little swimmer with his dead stare.

"It's almost midnight, Dr. Schreber. We shall speak after tonight's Tuning. No more delays, yes. No more . . . *inconsistencies* in your behavior."

Mr. Hand turned to leave, then paused.

"You appear quite frail, Doctor. Perhaps some excercise would do you good."

With that Mr. Hand vanished into the steam.

Exhausted and afraid, Schreber breathlessly reached out to pull himself up on the stepladder.

It wasn't there.

Schreber slipped back into the water and looked around in confusion. Finally he saw the stepladder. It was now far, far away from him *at the other end of the pool.*

All the energy drained from his limbs.

He couldn't make it. He would drown.

In a burst of panic he lunged for the tiled edge of the pool and held on. Slowly, foot by torturous foot, Dr. Schreber worked his way to the distant ladder.

Murdoch was waiting in the shadows when Schreber finally left the bathhouse, clutching his black leather bag.

He followed the nervous, wispy-haired physician at a discreet distance. Dr. Schreber looked like he had dressed in a hurry, Murdoch noted. The little man's tie was askew and his vest was unbuttoned.

Schreber only walked a block before turning into a side alley. Murdoch rushed to close the gap, and peered around the corner.

Dr. Schreber walked briskly toward an apparent dead end. He stopped in front of a brick wall and stood there. Moments passed and nothing happened.

Murdoch was debating whether he should join the little man when —to his astonishment—*a door revolved out of the wall!*

The door opened and a tall, white-skinned Stranger stood there. The Stranger stepped aside to allow Schreber to enter. Murdoch glimpsed some sort of tunnel behind them, with carts rolling past on tracks . . .

Then the Stranger shut the door. Seconds later it was gone. Nothing. Just a damp brick wall at the end of a dirty alley.

Perhaps Schreber had shot him up with some hallucinogenic drug, Murdoch speculated, pressing his hands against the solid brick surface.

Or perhaps he was insane.

Murdoch searched for a seam in the wall. Some sign of Schreber's departure. It was useless. Dr. Schreber had disappeared in front of him.

8

This was the part Dr. Schreber always dreaded.

He stepped from the platform, boarded one of the carts, and began the long, soul-wrenching descent past pipes, foundations, soil, granite, and sewers—to the bowels of the city.

To their world.

A multitiered archival storehouse where human memories were filed and fabricated. Dr. Schreber made his way to a dimly lit area featuring shelf after shelf of tiny catalogued vials filled with luminescent fluid.

Human souls. Glowing like phosphorescent mushrooms in the gloom.

Dr. Schreber stood at his own little workstation. An assortment of vials were propped in front of him, as well as six labeled syringes. He picked up a syringe labeled "Goodwin" and suctioned off the contents of a vial. Then he cross-checked the name Goodwin against a list.

As he worked an Assistant Stranger approached his station. "Have you completed tonight's task?"

His question annoyed Dr. Schreber. "You can't expect me to keep to the schedule night after night—I'm only *human,* after all," he reminded with a sly smile.

He was pleased to see the remark hit its target. The Assistant Stranger glanced away as if embarrassed. Despite their great powers, the Strangers envied mankind.

"Ah, these bring back memories," Dr. Schreber taunted, holding up a vial. "This one's still warm. What is it, the recollections of a great lover? A catalogue of conquests? We'll soon find out."

Schreber could feel the Assistant's yearning. His hunger to possess human passions.

Very deliberately he placed the vial aside, and smiled. "Anyway, you wouldn't appreciate that, would you—Mr. Whatever-you-call-yourself? Not the sort of *conquest* you understand."

The Assistant gave him a menacing stare.

"You remember, Doctor. What your place is, yes."

"What my place is, yes," Schreber mocked. "A kind of prison sentence, I'd say . . ."

They understood menace but they had no humor, no dreams, no

goals beyond their specific function, Dr. Schreber brooded as he returned to work.

He opened a vial and poured a few drops into a beaker. “Let’s see now,” he murmured with continued sarcasm. “A touch of unhappy childhood . . .”

He reached for another vial. “A dash of teenage rebellion.” He added more drops then opened a third vial.

“And last but not least . . .” He completed the mixture with a flourish. “A tragic death in the family.”

He dipped a needle in the mixture and sucked it into the syringe. Then he filled other syringes from beakers he had already carefully mixed.

Finally he was finished. Dr. Schreber put the prepared syringes into his black bag and snapped it shut. Suddenly the gloom was filled with a deep *chiming.*

The Assistant glanced up, then back at Schreber.

“It is time.”

Without a word Dr. Schreber snatched his bag and hurried off on his mission . . .

Even deeper in the underworld was the Central Chamber. This vast, domed room housed most of the Strangers as they went about their various tasks.

At the very center of the domed chamber was a huge—perhaps bottomless—pit.

Rising up from the pit were the gnarled *roots of the city.* Contorted. Mammoth.

Steel and cable towers, massive façades of brick and glass, huge gears and pillars—all braided together in a colossal double helix which disappeared into the cavernous dome above.

Watching down on all of this was the Great Metal Face. With a groan of gears the Face split to reveal . . . the Big Clock.

One by one the Strangers ceased working and bowed their heads. They arranged themselves in ranks and began to chant.

As their chanting grew louder the ancient one called Mr. Book appeared before them. His blank eyes surveyed the vast room.

“Let the Timing commence!”

At Mr. Book’s command a Stranger in the front row stepped forward, chanting in a high, hypnotic voice. A moment later the Stranger beside him joined in, intensifying the trancelike sound. One by one, every man in the room took his turn in the ritual.

And one by one, they all gathered around the great pit.

As their chanting reverberated through the domed chamber, the ancient Mr. Book rose up—and kept rising—*floating in the air* above their heads.

“Shut it down!” Mr. Book called.

At once a bulky scissor switch was thrown.

The sweeping second hand on the Big Clock came to an abrupt stop.

And at that very moment, all the clocks in the dark city whirred to a halt—on walls, tables, shelves, buildings—everywhere . . .

* * *

Frank Bumstead was burning the midnight oil.

He reviewed the case with his unique blend of methodical study and inspired meditation. In front of him stood a chalkboard with a scrawled flowchart of the murders.

A steaming coffee cup sat nearby as well as a short stack of files rescued from Walenski’s office. Balanced on Bumstead’s knees was his beloved accordion.

As he played, Bumstead cross-checked the files against the flowchart—using the music to help him focus. He was getting a feel for the killer, Bumstead thought, fingers flying over the keys. A psychic fix on why he carved hookers.

Then the music slowed—trailing off as Bumstead’s head slowly drooped to his chest. His fingers slipped away from the keys.

Even before his hand fell, the watch on his wrist had stopped dead.

Goodwin was enjoying a rare moment of intimacy with his wife over dinner. His good mood was mostly due to the chicken-potato soup his wife had served.

Piping hot out of the oven, just the way the Lord intended, Goodwin reflected smugly. Keep your woman barefoot in the kitchen and she’s happy.

“The foreman says he might take me off the damn night shift soon,” he announced.

Mrs. Goodwin seemed startled by the news. She nodded her head rapidly, eyes darting, like a plump bird on a shaky limb.

“That would be nice, dear,” she ventured.

In response Goodwin pitched forward into his soup. Unconscious.

His wife didn’t notice; she, too, was asleep.

All through their modest house, the clocks had stopped. And it was

silent.

Mr. Book was totally focused.

His body floated free of gravity as the chanting became more intense. His eyes were oddly bright against the leathery white skin.

Like some alien voyeur peering through slits cut in crumpled paper.

As the chant lifted, so did his body, and his eyes shone like black diamonds.

They weren't human eyes.

They were the multifaceted eyes of an insect.

A deep rumbling formed counterpoint to the chanting. Turbines groaned. Wheels turned within wheels.

Within the great pit—the roots of the city *began to revolve slowly* . . .

9

Murdoch lurked in the bleak alley where Dr. Schreber had vanished. Actually he had no place else to go. He could only hope Schreber reappeared the same way, Murdoch thought grimly.

In the distance a church bell began to toll. A dog started barking nearby.

Murdoch paced nervously, staring at the brick wall. Then he realized.

The bell had stopped tolling. The barking dog was silent. And the sounds of the city had come to an abrupt standstill . . .

He stood for a moment. Too quiet.

Then he heard it. A high, whining *chime.*

The electric moan sliced open the dense silence. Instinctively Murdoch crouched and glanced around.

A tall building across the street shuddered and began to distort—twisting and shifting. One of its towers elongated, stretching upward. Another skyscraper sprouted at the top, like a rubber flower.

The *chiming* rose higher.

Stunned, Murdoch rushed to the edge of the alley. He slowed and stepped into the street, eyes wide. He turned round and round, reeling with disbelief.

Time was frozen.

Cars were stopped in the street, drivers dead asleep over their steering wheels. At a bus stop two men had nodded off, leaning against one another. And there—across the street—was an *entire diner* filled with people drowsing.

In the window of a clock shop—all the clocks had stopped . . .

Murdoch heard a creaking noise through the constant whine. He looked up and saw a nearby building bend and whip like a flagpole in a hurricane.

On the edge of madness Murdoch ran from car to car, desperately trying to rouse people from their slumber. He shouted against the chiming, voice raw with fear.

“HELLO? CAN ANYONE HEAR ME?”

But the only answer he received was the eerie creaking as the skyscraper experienced its growing pains.

Suddenly a movement caught Murdoch’s eye.

The brick wall at the end of the alley was shifting again.

Murdoch fell back into a doorway. Watching.

The wall re-formed into a door. And Dr. Schreber stepped out . . .

Dr. Schreber clutched his medical bag and hurried along the street, head down. He didn't need to see. He knew what was happening. What they were doing.

The Strangers were *Tuning*—actually *remaking* the city in their own image. Constructing new sections by imagining them into being, with the aid of their hidden machines.

They needed machines to imagine, Schreber noted grimly. But not for long.

He kept his eyes down, staring at his feet, and walked in a straight line. Almost as if he were counting measured steps in an effort to ignore the whining insanity around him. The *Tuning* frightened him terribly.

Dr. Schreber didn't see Murdoch trailing him in the shadows. Nor did he look into the shop windows as he passed.

But Murdoch did. In every shop window two or three Strangers were busily arranging their human subjects as if they were mannequins.

In a grocery store a pair of egg-domed Strangers dragged someone wearing a smock behind the counter, and propped him up. Next door in the barbershop three Strangers worked on their unconscious customers, placing them in odd positions like dolls.

Abruptly, Schreber entered a small house.

Dr. Schreber shut the door behind him, grateful to be inside. Buffered from the predatory energy of the Strangers.

He consulted his notebook. Yes, there it was.

"The *Goodwins,"* he recited, "Jeremy, Sylvia, Matthew . . ."—Schreber flipped the page—"and little Jane."

Eagerly, he went to work. Moving down the hall, Dr. Schreber entered a bedroom where two young children were fast asleep.

"Ah . . ." Dr. Schreber murmured. He briskly snapped open his case and took out two glass syringes. No longer nervous, Schreber approached the sleeping children, needles poised . . .

After Imprinting the children, Dr. Schreber went to the dining room.

Three Strangers were already there. They were preparing the Goodwins for their new lives.

Mr. and Mrs. Goodwin sat completely motionless—frozen like dolls—as the Strangers undressed them. Mr. Goodwin was then reattired in a luxurious smoking jacket. Mrs. Goodwin was fitted with an expensive gown.

Dr. Schreber checked the syringes and watched the trio of Strangers at work. He was so intent on their preparations that he didn't notice another observer behind him.

Murdoch's face peered through the window, expression floating between disbelief and fascination. He clung to the rose trellis outside like a fly on a web, watching.

Their work finished, the three Strangers began to file out of the room. As each left he looked to Schreber.

Dr. Schreber waited until they were gone before picking up the syringes. He went to the table where Mr. and Mrs. Goodwin sat perfectly still. Carefully, Schreber positioned the first needle at the center of Mr. Goodwin's forehead.

A strange sound distracted him. Schreber turned in time to see a dining-room wall push back and expand wider. A fireplace created itself in the far corner—as did an immense china cabinet and crystal chandelier.

Schreber knew what was happening but it still made him uncomfortable. Especially while he had work to do.

Outside, Murdoch was caught completely unprepared. Desperately he grabbed the windowsill, nearly losing his grip as it widened around him. He looked up and saw the gable above him sprouting surreal flourishes, like a stone fruit tree.

Murdoch glanced down. The ground was now far below.

As he reached for the ledge it began to shift away from his clawing fingers . . .

Back inside the house Schreber had recovered his composure. He took in the newly appointed furnishings and shook his head disdainfully.

"The rich get richer," he mumbled, lifting his syringe. "Probably have maid's quarters before the night is over."

Schreber returned to the business at hand. Deftly he pushed the needle into the center of Mr. Goodwin's brain. He injected Goodwin with the contents of the syringe then turned his attention to Mrs. Goodwin.

Again, he pressed the needle into her forehead and Imprinted her. From this moment Mrs. Goodwin's soul belonged to the Strangers . . .

Schreber felt quite chipper as he left the Goodwins' house. He paused to admire the transformation. The modest three-bedroom dwelling had been upgraded to a stately manor.

Fortunately his work had also gone well, Schreber reflected, hurrying down the perfectly landscaped walk. He paused, face twitching like a ferret.

Something had moved across the shadows.

Frightened, he began walking faster. Suddenly a voice snaked out of the darkness.

"Dr. Schreber, I presume?"

A menacing shape emerged from the shadows and blocked his path.

"You!" Schreber gasped, sweat drenching his skin.

Murdoch stepped closer, his deep-set eyes, burning with violence. "Is that any way to greet a patient? If that's what you *are*—a doctor . . ."

"Mr. Murdoch, I . . . I . . ."

Schreber tried to step back but Murdoch grabbed his lapels.

"What's happening here? Why is everyone else *asleep?"*

"Keep your voice down, *please!"* Schreber pleaded, terrified.

Murdoch tightened his grip.

"Why can't I remember? What have you done to me?"

Schreber's eyes darted about wildly. "Nothing!" he assured in a panicked whisper. "I want to help. It was me who called you at the hotel . . ."

Murdoch's grip went slack.

Schreber glanced around. "We can't talk here! It's not safe!"

Suddenly Murdoch shook him hard. "I don't care! I want some answers *now!"* He leaned very close to Schreber's face, his eyes like black ice. "Who are they, Schreber? *What* are they? Why do they want *me?"*

Half hysterical with fear, Schreber pulled away. He could feel Murdoch's violent intensity swelling past the bursting point.

So could Murdoch. A dark red film of rage flooded over his control.

"John, please," Schreber was whispering, "I don't blame you for being angry. But we have to leave here. If they *see* us talking together . . ." He backed away hurriedly.

Rage collided with frustration as Murdoch advanced, fist cocked.

"Answer me!"

An electric shudder jolted from spine to brain and the rage exploded. Schreber's glasses flew off and he reeled back as if punched

in the face by an invisible hand . . .

Murdoch stood dumbfounded as Schreber collapsed on the sidewalk. They were still at least ten feet apart.

Schreber stared up at him with myopic awe.

“My God—you really *can* do it.”

As Schreber fumbled around the ground for his glasses Murdoch heard a discordant creak. He turned. A nearby wall began to shift—and change . . .

Slowly, a door appeared.

A slash of light cut the shadows as the door opened. Three Strangers stepped out. They didn’t notice Murdoch but he knew it was just a matter of seconds.

Their leader paused to scan the area, as if sensing a presence. Murdoch saw a familiar white face turn toward him.

He ducked around the corner and was gone by the time Mr. Hand spotted Dr. Schreber. The little man was still down on the sidewalk, flapping blindly for his glasses like a fallen bat.

Schreber was oblivious to the three Strangers slowly approaching him. Until his hand groped out and touched a shoe.

“Please—my glasses . . .”

At that moment Schreber’s fingers closed on his lost glasses. He hastily put them on and squinted at the shadowy figures looming over him.

His heart stopped when he saw Mr. Hand.

“No—he attacked me!” Dr. Schreber stammered, crawling away in terror. “I . . . I tried to . . .”

Mr. Hand silenced him with a raised hand. A look of annoyance darted across his pale, impassive face.

“Come, Dr. Schreber—we have much to do, yes.”

Far below the city in the underworld, the Great Clock above the Central Chamber stirred, clicked, and lurched to life . . .

The monotonous ticking resumed.

Machinery warmed down. The gnarled, massive roots of the city slowed to a stop.

The Strangers’ nightly ritual had come to an end . . .

10

Tick, tick, tick . . . Murdoch heard the sound as he hurried along the empty street. He paused and glanced up.

Every clock in the clock repair shop was working again. Ticking. Whirring. Chiming. Ringing. The noise rose in his brain like a Tower of Babel.

Murdoch heard other sounds and broke into a run.

When he reached the intersection he saw that everything was *starting* up *again.* People in their cars, the two men on the bench, the customers in the diner—everyone was waking from a deep sleep . . .

Amazingly, everyone went on about their business, as if they had merely dozed off momentarily.

Murdoch gaped at the cars and pedestrians moving across the intersection, his mind reeling.

No one noticed time had stopped—*and everything had changed.*

At Goodwin Manor, the elegantly dressed couple seated at the long dining table—came to life.

Mr. Goodwin lifted his head from his plate and resumed dining. He speared a piece of squab and went on with his conversation.

“. . . which I *said* to him. If he wants to promote Fredrickson over me that’s his lookout,” Goodwin concluded calmly. “Plenty of other firms would be happy to have me.”

Mrs. Goodwin beamed at her husband. “But darling, you have so much more *experience* than Fredrickson.”

He nodded smugly, eyes roving over the rich furnishings gracing the mansion. Experience. Yes . . .

* * *

Bumstead blinked, and slowly sat up, the accordion still on his lap. Something caught his eye.

The cream in his coffee cup was slowly circling round and round . . . forming a spiral. He stared, trying to remember. Then he saw the photo of the spiral fingerprints.

Walenski’s files. A phrase he had read there lingered in his memory.

Bumstead looked over at the open file beside the coffee cup. There

it was. An isolated fragment in the midst of Walenski's cryptic hieroglyphic scrawl.

"Someone is trying to kill me—they're not human—*they're something else."*

Like those spiral prints, Bumstead speculated. He closed the file, carefully packed his accordion away, and reached for his keys. He locked his office on his way out.

Walenski lived in a modest four-bedroom house that looked like the American dream house. When Walenski's wife, Kate, opened the door, Bumstead saw the nightmare.

Kate's hollow eyes were lost. Her attempt at a smile crumbled as he entered.

"Kate," Bumstead said softly. "How is he?"

"Oh, the same—he hasn't come out of his room in days . . ." Her shaky smile dissolved into sobs.

Bumstead gently touched her shoulder.

A few moments later he knocked on Walenski's bedroom door. No answer. Bumstead pushed open the door and stepped inside.

A putrid stench pervaded the darkened room. The place was an unholy mess; overturned furniture, dirty clothes, litter everywhere.

And there—crouched in the corner—was Detective Walenski himself. Unshaven. Haunted.

Walenski mumbled to himself as he scrawled on the wall with a marker. The other walls were covered with elaborate but hastily rendered images.

"Walenski?" Bumstead whispered. "It's me, Frank."

"Close the door, Frank," Walenski said calmly.

Bumstead swung the door shut. The smell became much worse.

Walenski continued his scribbling. As Bumstead's eyes adjusted to the dim light he took a closer look at the walls—odd figures in long coats holding knives, clocks, strange insects, and a legend: We Are Living in an Illusion.

Bumstead hunkered down beside Walenski and faced him eye to eye. "You left behind some unfinished business, Eddie."

"Oh, that." He seemed unconcerned.

"I've been going through your old files—interesting case. Could make a man's career or . . ." Bumstead shrugged. "Or break it."

"Yeah, yeah, yeah. Yeah. I was on that case."

"And then what?" Bumstead pressed. "What happened, Eddie?"

Walenski seemed surprised. "Nothing happened, Frank. I've just been spending time in the subway, riding in circles, thinking in

circles." He managed a haggard smile. "There's no way out. I've been over every inch of this city . . ."

A mouse scuttled past. With lightning reflexes Walenski hurled his shoe and hit it. The mouse scurried under the bed. Walenski's smile widened. He turned back to Bumstead, his eyes shining like oily water. Grinning insanely.

"Your wife's worried about you," Bumstead said carefully.

The grin faded. "My *wife?"* He snorted. "She's not my wife. I don't know who she is . . ." Walenski leaned close. *"I don't know who any of us are."*

Bumstead scratched his chin. "I'm afraid you lost me there . . ."

"Do you think about the past much, Bumstead?"

It was more a challenge than a question.

"About as much as the next guy."

"You ever heard of a kind of madness that can *flaw* someone's memories? Create inconsistencies?"

Bumstead looked at him. Walenski shuffled closer. *"Neither have I,"* he hissed, glaring at Bumstead. "I've been trying to remember things —*clearly* remember things—from my past. But the more I try to think back, the more it all starts to unravel. None of it seems real . . ."

Walenski's hand shook as he wiped his face.

"It's like I've just been dreaming this life," he said hoarsely. "And when I finally wake up I'll be somebody else—somebody totally different . . ."

He looked away, tears staining his eyes.

"Oh, shit, Frank, you think I'd be in here if I could *explain* this stuff?"

Bumstead followed Walenski's gaze to the strange images. Tall men in long black coats. Holding knives.

"You saw something, didn't you?" Bumstead said softly. "Something to do with the case."

Walenski violently shook his head.

"You don't get it. *There is no case.* There never was—it's all just a big joke."

But he wasn't laughing. Walenski wrapped his arms around his knees and began to rock. As if trying to quell the terror shuddering through his belly.

Helplessly Bumstead watched the wretch who used to be his best friend. After a moment Walenski seemed to regain some semblance of composure. He took a deep breath and turned away.

"You should go now, Frank," Walenski said quietly.

He picked up his pen and returned to his scribbling. Bumstead studied Walenski for a moment then backed away. As he reached the door, Walenski called out.

"Frank . . ."

Walenski looked back over his shoulder and fixed Bumstead with his sad, haunted eyes.

"Stop looking for answers. Stop asking questions. You don't want to know what you'll find."

He was probably right, Bumstead thought with a sigh, shutting the door behind him.

* * *

The Public Library at night was nearly deserted.

In a cavernous marble room devoid of any life, a sole researcher browsed the stacks of dusty volumes. The sign above him read: City Map Section.

Crouched in a narrow space between bookshelves, Murdoch hurriedly selected a series of rolled maps.

He sat by himself at a long table and spread documents out in front of him. Intently, he began to sift through them.

Murdoch scanned two old maps then reached for another. It *leaped into his hand as if by magic.*

Murdoch was too busy to notice.

He must have gone over two dozen maps and it was always the same. Little arrows indicating Shell Beach was *off the page.* Each and every one. And beside the little arrow the same legend: Shell Beach Not On This Map.

Over and over again. Murdoch's frustration spilled over into rage as he roamed between the shelves. He snatched up dusty documents and discarded them after a brief examination. With each document he became angrier—hurling and ripping maps until he was enveloped in a dusty cloud of shredded paper.

"This is *nuts . . ."* His voice echoed in the quiet.

Murdoch gathered up some maps and went back to the front desk.

The librarian ensconced behind the book-laden desk was very thin, with narrow eyes and tight lips. Her greenish skin looked as if it had never been exposed to outdoor air. The sign behind her head read: SILENCE.

Trying to smother his anger, Murdoch set the maps down with a flourish. "Why don't any of these maps show the ocean?" he demanded.

The cadaverous librarian squinted at him, then at the maps. Very carefully she unrolled each map and studied it.

"That's odd—I've never noticed that before," she murmured. She beamed at Murdoch as if he had just won a prize. "You're the first person to point that out."

The rage seemed to trickle out of him like sand in an hourglass. He turned and headed for the door.

Outside it was still night. Murdoch paused at the top of the library stairs and removed something from his pocket. The Shell Beach postcard.

Murdoch stepped under the light and stared at the card as if it held the answer to everything.

The handwriting was sprawling. Nothing special about the message: "Dear John, having a great time. Everything like it always was. Wish you were here—Karl."

Murdoch flipped the card over to the ocean scene and stared closely. He lifted the postcard closer to the light. Yes, there was something.

In one corner of the color photo was a ramshackle building with a fishing trawler moored outside. Above the door, in faded letters it read: Karl Harris & Co. Fisheries.

Murdoch's memory flashed back to the boiler room in the hotel. He recalled studying the initials "K. H." on the suitcase before throwing it into the flames.

Shoving the postcard in his pocket, Murdoch ran frantically down the sweeping steps of the library to a phone booth.

"Karl Harris . . ." he muttered breathlessly, flipping through the white pages. He found the name and address. The address was a place called Neptune's Kingdom. He tore out the page in case his memory faltered.

Driven by a sense of urgency, Murdoch stepped out into the street and looked around. He spotted a news vendor at a kiosk. As Murdoch approached he saw the news headlines all trumpeting the KILLER'S LATEST SPREE.

He paused and peered at the vendor who sat reading a newspaper.

"Excuse me. Can you tell me how to get to Avenue C?"

The vendor looked up from his tabloid. Murdoch noticed the headline: SLICER STALKS CITY.

"Try the subway," the vendor suggested.

Murdoch gaped at him. The vendor was the same man as the one behind the desk back at the hotel. The squat manager.

“You got a problem, pal?”

Murdoch shook his head and turned away. Brain pounding with confusion, he began looking for the subway . . .

Far below the subway, in the underworld, the Strangers were gathering in the Central Chamber to receive their nightly assignments.

Mr. Book held court, his parched white face leaning over a huge spiral-shaped model of the city. The city of the future. Their city. Created every night by them, section by section.

The model was Mr. Book’s strategy table. He pointed at various sections with his metal cane as he spoke.

“Tonight’s experiments shall be conducted in the following locations —”

Two Assistants followed him closely, making notes in the pads. The other Strangers looked on obediently but a seething tension snaked through the gathering.

“The first subject shall be Imprinted *here* in Sector Eight . . .” Mr. Book said briskly. He moved around the table and pointed out another section, near the center.

“Subjects two and three. They shall be Imprinted in this building on Avenue F . . .”

Mr. Book stretched his long, ancient body and pointed his cane at a street near the edge of the city.

“And on Avenue M . . .”

One of the Assistants meekly spoke up. “Mr. Book, there is a problem . . .”

The tension escalated as Mr. Book fixed the Assistant with his icy glare. It was too much for the first Assistant. Too frightened to go on, he looked at his cohort.

Reluctantly the second Assistant stepped forward.

“There is no Avenue M, Mr. Book—we were unable to complete it during the last Tuning.”

A shocked silence greeted his statement. Mr. Book fumed, his face as hard as white granite as he waited for an explanation.

The first Assistant recovered his courage and jumped in. “During the last Tuning we detected a certain *randomness,* a lack of control. *That* has never happened before.”

Mr. Book’s eyes became black slits. “An *opposing* influence on the machines, yes?”

Both Assistants nodded their heads vigorously. A nervous murmur rippled through the Central Chamber.

“If this is true then this man Murdoch is more *powerful* than we thought,” Mr. Book declared.

Suddenly the impassive Strangers began to shuffle anxiously, becoming visibly agitated.

“He becomes more dangerous by the moment!” one of them cried.

“He is becoming . . . like us!” shouted another.

Mr. Hand lifted his voice above the others.

“So *we* must become like him!” he declared as he strode into the Central Chamber with Dr. Schreber in tow.

Everyone, including Mr. Book, gave him their full attention.

“Our methods have failed,” Mr. Hand told them. “We must *think* as he does, *feel* as he does—stay one step ahead.”

He gestured at Schreber, who blinked nervously at the assembly and wiped his brow with a handkerchief.

“The good doctor has done as we asked . . .” Mr. Hand turned and glared at the little man. *“Yes?”*

Schreber jerked his head up and down. He fumbled with his bag and held up a vial labeled “John Murdoch.”

“The life and times of John Murdoch,” Dr. Schreber announced hoarsely, “volume two.”

Later, when most of the Strangers had been dispersed, Dr. Schreber prepared Mr. Hand.

However, not everyone was in favor of the experiment. A small group had remained to monitor the proceedings and one of them voiced his concern.

“We must not do this,” the Stranger stated flatly. The others nodded agreement.

Mr. Book’s eyes narrowed to black crescents.

“What Mr. Hand proposes is our *only* option,” he said slowly, as if admonishing a child.

But Mr. Wall still had serious reservations. He met Mr. Book’s stony stare without wavering.

“Murdoch *does not* possess his memories, yes . . .” Mr. Wall said evenly. He looked at Mr. Hand. “How will his *Imprint* allow us to find him?”

The others nodded, anxious for an answer.

“He is *searching* for his past, yes,” Mr. Hand explained. “Everywhere he goes, everyone he seeks out will be *known* to us.”

One of the Strangers still wasn’t satisfied.

"But to Imprint one of us . . . failure has always resulted," he reminded cautiously. "Perhaps we have forgotten what happened last time—?"

Another Stranger bowed his head sadly. "Yes. Poor, poor Mr. . . ."

"We have not forgotten," Mr. Book snapped. He glared at the assembled Strangers, losing patience. "If Mr. Hand wishes to make this—sacrifice—for the greater good, so be it."

The ancient Stranger gestured at Schreber.

"Imprint!"

Mr. Hand lay back on the table.

Dr. Schreber nervously fingered the large syringe. If this didn't work his punishment would be far worse than death. He glanced back at Mr. Book. He saw no mercy in the leathery white face.

Nothing to lose, Schreber decided. He lifted the syringe and leaned closer to Mr. Hand.

"This may sting a bit," he confided. Then he braced and plunged the long needle directly into Mr. Hand's forehead. The skull was surprisingly soft. The needle sank in easily.

Mr. Hand's body tensed hard, then went into violent spasms. He clutched Dr. Schreber's wrist and squeezed.

Schreber cried out in pain as the long, bony fingers clamped like a vise. The little man jerked free and scurried back, his watery eyes intent on Mr. Hand's contorted face. As if trying to see inside the soft, white skull . . .

The dreams were lush. Exquisite.

He was a little boy running across warm sand, laughing with delight . . . The lazy breaking of surf. The cool salt breeze. Seagulls crying.

Then the dreams moved faster. Shadows.

He was nine, sitting in his bedroom, sketching in a large book. Circles.

He was swaddled in a blanket, curled in a fireman's arms as flames consumed his home.

He was a grown man having dinner with a beautiful woman. Emma. She was laughing. They were making love. Emma. Curled in his arms.

Then the memories turned. Black. Red. Rage.

The hotel room. The goldfish bowl. The woman screaming. Her mouth like a goldfish. Her gaping terror. Shrieking as she tried to fend off the knife attack. The blade splitting her chest. The long spurts of oily red blood.

The hotel mirror.

John Murdoch turning to view himself in the foggy glass. His bloody shirt. The glistening red knife in his hand. His crazed despair . . .

Then John Murdoch's reflection dissolved and became Mr. Hand—the new owner of Murdoch's tormented memories . . .

The Central Chamber was silent.

Mr. Book stepped closer, his piercing gaze fixed on Mr. Hand. Dr. Schreber and the others backed away, allowing themselves a cautious distance from the spasmodic Stranger, writhing on the table.

"Is it . . . done?" Mr. Book asked finally.

The question seemed to rouse Mr. Hand.

He slowly got to his feet, his eyes darting around the room. A puncture wound marked his smooth white skull. A strange kind of smile crept across his thin lips. As if he had a marvelous secret.

"Yes, Mr. Book, I have John Murdoch—in mind."

11

The grinding roar of an arriving train filled the dimly lit passage as John Murdoch hurried to the subway platform. He passed a derelict asleep on a bench and a man sweeping trash, then he paused.

The torn poster on the wall. Framed in a cracked glass case. Shell Beach. The woman waving.

It was a poster version of the billboard.

A long black shadow fell across the glass.

Murdoch whirled, muscles coiled and chest heaving. The startled figure he bumped into swore and bustled away. Not a Stranger. An ordinary man.

The train whistle drew Murdoch from the poster. He ran the last few yards and jumped on just as the doors closed behind him.

The carriage was sparsely populated. A middle-aged secretary in a severe suit and sensible shoes sat snoring in one corner. Across from her were a pair of businessmen reading newspapers.

Rushing blackness covered the windows as the train dipped into a tunnel. The lights flickered like execution night on death row.

When they came on again Murdoch noticed something that jolted him out of his seat. Eyes wide, he grabbed a hand strap and studied a map of the subway system.

Murdoch's brain focused on the words "Shell Beach"—a station at the end of the line. He glanced around. Trouble was, he happened to be on a Blue train and Shell Beach was on the Green Line.

He ran his finger along the diagram and found a station where the two lines intersected. Charring Cross.

The Charring Cross platform was deserted but a sign clearly indicated Green Line. After a few minutes a Green Line train rolled into the station. Murdoch stepped aboard and immediately went to the subway map.

He stared at the words "Shell Beach" like a thirsty man sighting water. Impatiently, he glanced around the half-empty car. It seemed to take a long time to get to the next station.

Finally the train rolled to a stop. Bates Place.

A droning voice came over the speaker.

"All change. Platform three—all change."

Murdoch stopped a young man holding a kitten.

"What does that mean—all change?" he demanded. "I'm trying to get to the end of the line."

The young man shrugged. "You want the express, buddy."

After a few minutes Murdoch located the express platform. He stood waiting with a few others, his heart tripping like a schoolboy's on his first date.

It's very close now, Murdoch told himself. Hang tough. Then he heard the distant whine of an approaching train. The whine deepened to a roar as it rolled into view—"Shell Beach" clearly lettered on the front.

To Murdoch's dismay the train kept rolling right past him, without even slowing down.

Stunned, depressed, and lost, he looked around and spotted a uniformed station guard. The guard was hurrying to the stairway but Murdoch chased him down.

"Hey," Murdoch gasped. "How come that train didn't stop?"

The guard smirked, as if the answer were obvious.

"That was the express."

Murdoch moved back along the platform and saw a white-haired man sitting on a bench. "How do I get to Shell Beach?" he asked. It was a mistake.

The old man unfolded a personal map and began reeling off a list of complicated directions.

". . . westbound Red train to Central Terminal, transfer to southbound Yellow train to Junction Four. That's your best bet," the old man added with a flourish.

Three trains later Murdoch was close to panic. He clutched the handrail, anticipating the next stop. When the doors opened he was first off.

He glanced around for the express platform.

Suddenly he froze. A derelict was lying asleep on a bench. *The same derelict he had seen before.* Murdoch spun around wildly.

There it was. The *same torn poster* behind cracked glass. The *same sweeper* walked past, broom in hand.

Murdoch's body sagged, energy dissolving like snow in a steamroom.

He was back where he started!

The smoke inside the Limbo Room lingered long after the club closed. Emma took her time changing into her street clothes. In a way she felt safe in the club.

“Good night,” the rotund barman called out as she walked out. “Careful goin’ home now.”

Actually, Emma had her own personal bodyguard.

Inspector Frank Bumstead sat in his parked car in a darkened corner of the street. As he watched her leave the club Bumstead idly fingered the card he’d found in the alley where Murdoch vanished.

Dr. Schreber’s card.

The neon sign said: Automat.

May’s apartment was above the sign. She answered the knock with an expectant grin, tying her robe around her waist. She had been drinking but sobered up the moment she saw the tall, black-clad figure standing there.

His smooth, white skull and crescent eyes were vaguely menacing, as was his thin smile. Three others loomed behind him. Tall, shadowy figures. All in black coats.

May’s grin faded and she tried to scream.

Mr. Wall’s gloved hand shot to her throat, shutting off any sound.

“We are looking for John Murdoch,” Mr. Hand said as his cohorts entered the apartment. Mr. Hand followed, looking at the provocatively attired prostitute with something close to lust.

It wasn’t lost on Mr. Wall. He was becoming increasingly annoyed at Mr. Hand flaunting his newly acquired human traits. Especially carnal passion.

The Strangers weren’t subtle with May.

They broke furniture as well as bruised flesh but in the end they were frustrated. May cowered in a corner of the room, tears streaking her mascara and her hair in disarray, as Mr. Wall paced nervously.

The young Mr. Sleep crouched before her, his childlike eyes gleaming. He pressed a finger to his lips to signal silence.

“She knows nothing, Mr. Hand,” Mr. Wall said accusingly.

Mr. Hand stood at the window, his back to the room. “A dead end, yes, Mr. Wall.”

“We thought his Imprint would allow us to track him, yes? But instead we have been brought here—this is irrational—”

Mr. Hand whirled, cutting him off. *“Instincts* are irrational. And we must follow where they lead, yes.”

Mr. Sleep was also impatient with Mr. Hand’s new “human” approach. He whispered something to Mr. Rain.

“Mr. Sleep suggests he may go to places familiar,” Mr. Rain said carefully, fearful of Mr. Hand’s alien traits. “His job, yes?”

"We do not care for our job," Mr. Hand sniffed disdainfully.

Mr. Wall swallowed his annoyance for the common good. "Indulge us, Mr. Hand . . ." he murmured as if speaking to a child. "If you were Mr. Murdoch, yes?"

A faraway look fell over Mr. Hand's pale features like a curtain. The others knew what was happening. Mr. Hand was *remembering.*

"If I were Mr. Murdoch—I would . . . *remember* how my wife had hurt me, by sleeping with another man," Mr. Hand said softly.

The Strangers watched with awe—and envy—as images bubbled up in Mr. Hand's mind . . .

Emma backstage in the Limbo Room, kissing someone. Not John Murdoch . . .

An enraged Murdoch scuffling with the man who kissed Emma. Anguish. Madness . . .

"And I would look for a way to hurt her in return," Mr. Hand said, his voice trembling.

He stepped away from the window, wincing as if in pain. His long shadow fell over May, who twitched fearfully. The watery black stains streaking her cheeks, the frizzy hair and splotchy red lipstick made her look like a terrified clown. Eyes wide, she saw Mr. Hand slip something from the folds of his coat. A dagger.

May scrambled back on the couch as Mr. Hand moved closer. Drooling and gibbering madly, she tried to shield herself with her teddy bear.

"Leave me alone with her," Mr. Hand rasped breathlessly. "There is work to be done . . ."

* * *

Bumstead was mildly surprised to find Dr. Schreber working at night. And he was fascinated by the bizarre disarray of Schreber's inner sanctum. In a strange way it reminded him of Walenski's office.

Oddly, Bumstead found Schreber's rat maze repellent. He tried to avoid looking at it as he questioned the wispy-haired doctor about John Murdoch.

The doctor sat stiffly behind his desk, his face half shadowed by the lamp. His replies were prompt and polite but Bumstead sensed the nervous little man was concealing something. He could smell it.

"Did Mr. Murdoch ever say anything to you about men who may be after him—threatening him?"

Schreber gave him a condescending smile.

"No—I hadn't heard anything like that. But as I said, he may be

delusional."

Bumstead noticed the doctor kept his hands tightly clasped. He stood and began pacing around Schreber's office. He paused to study an open notepad on a bench.

"What is it that you *do* here, Doctor?" he murmured.

Schreber seemed agitated by Bumstead's interest in the notebook. "I help people," he said quickly. "I solve problems—much like yourself, Inspector. But my real work is researching memory function. That's what all these are—rather crude experiments . . ."

He gestured at the rat maze and other equipment cluttering the office. "Years ago—so long now it seems like another lifetime—I stumbled across the technique of Memory Imprinting. The principle of taking the memories of one rat and putting them into the head of another . . ."

Schreber gave Bumstead a wry smile.

"I know what you're thinking. It can't be applied to people. After all, none of us are laboratory rats—are we, Inspector . . . ?"

He was wrong. Bumstead was thinking about something Walenski had said. *"Do you think about the past much?"*

Bumstead smiled at Schreber. "You believe this . . . condition . . . of Murdoch's is genuine? You seem something of an authority on the subject. Maybe he got the idea from you."

It worked. Schreber stood up in a huff.

"As I've said, it's no act."

Bumstead stepped closer to Schreber. Coming in for the kill. "Something troubles me . . ." he confided. "When I met Murdoch he didn't strike me as insane. Under the circumstances he seemed *completely rational."*

Schreber clasped his hands tight. "But you said he believes there's someone after him?"

"Exactly, Doctor," Bumstead said thoughtfully, moving to the door. "Thanks for your cooperation."

Rivers of sweat soaked through Schreber's rumpled suit as he watched Bumstead leave. Distractedly he toyed with the trapdoor in his rat maze.

Murdoch slowly climbed out of the subway exit.

At least he had managed to find Avenue C, he thought ruefully. After checking the street sign he headed down the darkened block.

He walked past a number of garishly painted storefronts until he came to a small building. The bright green and yellow sign read:

Welcome to Neptune's Kingdom.

Instinctively Murdoch moved to the side of the building. A grotesque underwater scene decorated a small door beside the ticket booth. The sign on the security gate read: Closed.

Murdoch looked up and saw a light on the second floor.

"Hello!" he shouted.

No answer.

Murdoch rattled the gate. Nothing.

He glanced around. The street was deserted.

Without hesitation he lifted his foot and smashed the window in the ticket booth.

At night Neptune's Kingdom looked like the inside of a whale that had swallowed an array of exotic sea creatures. As Murdoch entered the steel-ribbed corridor he became aware of a gurgling sound.

It was the bubbling of dozens of illuminated glass tanks, filled with restless fish. Spectral. Unreal.

Murdoch moved past the glowing reflections until he found a stairway. A chairlift for invalids had been installed next to it. Cautiously Murdoch began climbing.

At the top of the stairs was an entrance hall decorated with a large collection of mounted fish—all shapes and species from salmon to killer whale.

Murdoch took a few tentative steps along the shadowy hall.

"Hold it right there."

The voice sounded like there was a weapon attached to it. Murdoch slowly turned. He was right. A grizzled old man in a wheelchair had a shotgun pointed directly at his chest.

Murdoch squinted at him. The old man was wearing pajamas and had a cigarette permanently attached to the side of his mouth. Somehow Murdoch found him familiar.

For a second the two of them stared at each other. Then the old man leaned forward with a quizzical smile.

"Johnny?" He lowered the shotgun and shook his head. "Its been so damn long, I thought you'd forgotten your Uncle Karl—then Emma called me and told me you *had!"*

Karl hooted at his own terrible joke. He suddenly wheeled closer and grasped Murdoch around the waist in a tight bear hug.

"Uncle . . . Karl," Murdoch whispered. But his memory was an empty glass.

Mr. Hand felt quite at home in John and Emma Murdoch's apartment. He sifted through the contents of a bureau, while the others milled about the dimly lit room.

He lifted a framed photo of Murdoch and Emma smiling together. As he stared at the photo his glistening black eyes clouded over. Mr. Hand was remembering.

The other Strangers waited, hoping for some insight into Murdoch's whereabouts. The man had to be eliminated.

"We've been here before," Mr. Hand announced finally.

Mr. Rain shrugged. "This was to be his home, yes."

"We were here—*last night,"* Mr. Hand corrected.

He gestured at the ashtray beside the chair Murdoch had occupied. At the crushed butt of his cigarette. The Strangers gathered around the ashtray, enthralled by Mr. Hand's new powers.

Mr. Hand held up the photo. "This was when we loved her," he murmured.

The concept of love—and Mr. Hand's flaunting of "we"—ignited Mr. Wall's resentments. "This is all well and good, Mr. Hand," he snapped impatiently. *"We* require a more *practical* link to his *present* whereabouts."

Mr. Hand turned slowly, his dreamy expression stitched with deep pain. Then the veil seemed to lift from his eyes.

"Yes," he sighed. "And I know where to look . . ."

12

Emma always liked walking home along the riverside. It took her out of her way but she found it inspiring. A riverbank walkway, lined with the occasional bench overlooking the water, the bridge looming nearby, lights twinkling; it was idyllic. And sad.

It made Emma think of what could have been. She walked to a particular bench, one she'd shared with John when they were young lovers. She sat down and gazed at the water, classic features lost in a Mona Lisa reverie.

"We're very lucky, when you think about it."

Emma looked up, startled. She hadn't noticed the tall, shadowy figure standing at the rail.

"Excuse me?" she gasped.

Her first impression was that of an older, distinguished gentleman, out for an evening stroll. She relaxed a notch.

The tall man gestured with his gloved hand.

"To be able to revisit those places which have meant something to us."

His words touched a responsive chord. Emma smiled bitterly. "Are we? I thought it was more that we were haunted by them."

"Perhaps," the tall man reflected. "But imagine a life alien to yours in which your memories were not your own, but shared by every other of your kind. Imagine the torment of such a life. No experiences to call your own."

Emma stared at him intently, mesmerized by his words. "If it was all you knew," she ventured, "maybe it would be a comfort."

"But if you were to learn different. If you were to discover something *better . . ."* His voice trailed off.

Emma didn't know what to say.

Finally he broke the silence. "There used to be a ferry. When I was a boy. Biggest thing you ever saw. Like a floating birthday cake."

A chill passed through Emma. She stood, and moved to the rail. "That's just what my husband once said to me. On this very spot."

Emma tried to get a better look at the man. He wasn't as old as she first thought, with smooth white features and piercing eyes.

"Where is your husband *now?"* he asked intently.

The question unleashed a tide of emotion.

"I wish I knew," Emma murmured. She tried to smile. "What brings you here?"

"I . . . met my wife at this place."

Emma's smile grew warmer at the coincidence.

"It's where I first met my husband."

Mr. Hand looked at her for a long time before replying.

"Small world," he said with an odd smile.

A quick shiver of fear jolted Emma's senses as he stepped closer. Her body tensed.

But he merely tipped his hat and moved off into the shadows. A moment later he was gone.

Emma stood there, vaguely relieved, as if she'd been spared. Then something caught her eye.

A blinking neon sign.

Food. Automat. Food. Automat . . .

Like a lighthouse in a gathering storm.

A beam of light, carved through the smoke and illuminated the large screen with images. People. Places.

Karl sat behind the projector, watching Murdoch's reactions in the flickering darkness. He took a deep drag on his cigarette and pointed.

"That's your aunt Sally. That big guy is Herb, her husband. IQ of a slug—but could that guy *eat!*"

Murdoch nodded distractedly. But Karl knew he didn't recognize anyone in the family slides being flashed on the screen. Karl wanted to help. He had always liked Johnnie. And he knew what it meant to lose part of yourself.

"Johnny, I've been thinking—this amnesia business must be *stress,* that's all. You need a long rest and—"

"Wait!" Murdoch hissed.

Karl looked up at the screen. It was a color shot of young Murdoch—perhaps age nine—standing stiffly in the front yard of a beach house.

"Is that me?"

Karl nodded. Murdoch stood up and walked to the screen. He examined the image closely, especially something in the background. Karl leaned forward in his wheelchair and squinted.

It was a billboard that read: Welcome to Shell Beach.

"Shell Beach, is that where I grew up?"

Karl smiled. "Yep, that's what I said. Your hometown. I used to take

you out on the boat all the time—"

"I need to get there, Karl," Murdoch said, leaning closer. "How do I get to Shell Beach?"

Karl shook his head slowly. Johnny doesn't understand, he told himself, he doesn't remember. But the truth was, *neither did Karl.* He'd forgotten the way to Shell Beach.

"Oh, I haven't been out there in years," he told Murdoch. "Haven't been out the front door in three—"

Murdoch gripped Karl's chair, haunted eyes glaring at his uncle. "Come on! You must remember—you must remember—you must have *some* idea!"

"Sorry, Johnny," he mumbled, glancing away. "You'd be relying on the fading memory of an old man."

Frustrated, Murdoch turned back to the screen. He began going through the slides. Totally absorbed.

Slowly it dawned on him. The images offered the first glimpse of *daylight* he'd seen in weeks, maybe months.

"It's so *bright* there, the sky's so blue . . ."

"Brighter times, I guess," Karl said gravely.

Murdoch missed the attempt at humor. He was intent on something the nine-year-old Johnny was holding. A notebook. There was something written on the cover: "Guide to Shell Beach—By Johnny Murdoch Age 9."

"You were always scribbling in that damn book . . ." Karl offered, wheeling closer. He took the remote from Murdoch and changed the slide.

It was an image of young Karl with another youth standing next to a fisherman's boat.

"That's me and your pa." His words floated in the quiet. "What a couple of handsome fools. That was back when I still had my sea legs."

Karl's eyes misted over, full of longing for times past. Better times. He lit another cigarette.

Murdoch felt a sense of desperation swelling inside his chest, cutting off his breath. "What happened to my parents? Where are they now?"

"They're dead, Johnny," Karl said with a blank expression. "They died when the house burnt down. I looked after you. You don't remember, really?"

Murdoch just shook his head. Karl flicked on another slide. Again, the young Johnny. Wearing a short-sleeved shirt in the bright sun.

But something was different. Murdoch looked closer. There was a dark *stripe* on young Johnny's arm. Murdoch pointed at the mark.

"What's that?" He leaned closer. "It looks like . . . *a scar.*"

"Huh?" Karl said, as if startled awake. "That's right. Cut yourself pretty bad—in the fire."

Murdoch stood, unbuttoned a shirt cuff, and rolled up his sleeve. He displayed his bare arm to Uncle Karl.

No scar.

Karl gripped Murdoch's arm. "Johnny, what does it mean?"

Murdoch pulled away. He looked at the stacks of slides Karl had been showing him. With a swipe of his scarless arm he scattered the slides all over the room.

"It means all these *are lies,"* Murdoch said, breathless with rage.

Uncle Karl shrank back in his wheelchair, suddenly very afraid of his hollow-eyed nephew . . .

Up close the Automat was hardly impressive. Generic design. Eat up and get out. From the sidewalk Emma could see two policemen in a booth near the glass door.

Emma decided not to go in right away. Instead she checked the small alley beside the Automat. She found an outside stairway illuminated by a red lamp glowing in the curtains above.

Drawn by instinct Emma slowly began climbing.

She didn't see the shadowy figure slip into the alley behind her.

Carefully. Quietly. She moved upstairs to the landing. The door was open a crack.

"Hello?" Emma called.

No answer.

Emma pushed the door open wider. She stepped inside and looked around. The sole light in the room came from the red window lamp. It was enough to see something had happened. Overturned furniture attested to the violence.

There was a certain smell. Emma saw the glinting reflections of a beaded curtain. As she neared the curtain she made out a female figure in the next room.

The smell was stronger now. Emma pushed through the beaded curtain. A wild-haired female sat at her mirror.

Emma moved closer. Then her heart stopped beating and the ground tilted.

The woman at the mirror was bound to her velvet chair with ropes.

Hands behind her back.

In the vanity mirror Emma glimpsed her face, eyes wide in blind disbelief—gory red spirals carved into her flaccid flesh from breast to belly . . .

Dimly Emma realized the smell was human blood.

Then she fell apart. Moaning, she turned to run and stumbled into something. Someone.

Emma screamed as a shadowy figure clutched her wrists. She flailed desperately but he was too strong.

Sobbing, she collapsed. For a second it became quiet. Emma looked up.

The concerned blue eyes of Inspector Bumstead peered down at her.

When Emma recovered she was shocked, relieved, and confused. "What are you doing here?" she murmured.

"I've been following you." Bumstead stepped past Emma and stared dispassionately at May's corpse. "Looks like my hunch paid off."

He turned and regarded Emma in much the same way. "So why are you here, Mrs. Murdoch?"

Emma glanced at the figure behind him with dread. "My husband told me he'd been here. He said he wanted to test himself, make sure he wasn't capable of—Oh, God!"

The words caught in her throat. She suppressed a sob, uncertain of what to think . . . or say. At all costs she wanted to protect John.

"I wanted to talk to her," Emma went on. "I thought maybe she could help me find him . . ."

Bumstead nodded, his expression softening a notch. He knew she hadn't killed May. And that she'd been searching for her husband. Bumstead put a reassuring hand on her shoulder. He felt her tense up.

"Stay here," Bumstead said gently. "I'll call the station."

As he moved away a faint noise drew Emma's attention. She looked around the littered apartment, her eyes coming to rest on a wooden screen.

"It's me, Bumstead. Get me Stromboli . . ."

As the inspector's procedural voice droned on, Emma stood up, drawn to the screen. Behind it was an adjoining room. Small. Neat. With a double bed and various dolls and toys. Colorful children's drawings were pinned to the walls. Emma glanced back at the living room.

Bumstead was still on the phone. She could see him pacing through a crack in the screen. A scuffling sound caught her ear and she turned.

Emma moved to the bed and bent down. Cautiously she lifted the bedspread. There in the shadows beneath the bed was a round, frightened face.

It was a little girl, cringing in terror. She edged away from Emma's outstretched hand, leaving behind a scrawled drawing. The little girl had been scribbling with crayon on a piece of paper. Alone in the semidarkness.

* * *

Bumstead put the receiver down and noticed Emma was gone. Momentarily dismayed, he spun around looking for her. Then he heard a low voice behind the screen. When he stepped into the adjoining room he paused, blinking in amazement.

Emma was on the floor cradling a near-catatonic girl in her arms. The little girl was clutching a ripped, bloodstained teddy bear. Her blank, staring eyes seemed to be focused on some faraway nightmare.

"Where the hell did she come from?"

Emma gave him an angry glance, as if he were responsible. "I found her hiding," she said, stroking the little girl's hair.

She reached for a crumpled piece of paper and handed it to Bumstead.

"She was drawing this," Emma said softly. She nodded her head toward the screen—and the murdered woman on the other side. "She saw what happened here."

Bumstead gaped at the drawing.

Four tall stick men, dressed in black. One with an impossibly long knife . . . slashed at a screaming woman.

Tall stick men in black. *Like the strange figures on Walenski's wall.*

Hours later, after the detectives, forensic experts, and photographers finished combing the apartment, the social workers arrived.

It was the moment Emma had been dreading. She had to give the little girl Eva over to the authorities. Eva managed to tell Emma her name but not much else, still locked in the horror she had witnessed.

Holding Eva to her breast, Emma carried her out and personally transferred the little girl into the hands of a police department social worker. The child didn't respond, but as the car pulled away, she looked back.

Emma stood in the chill night air watching the car until it turned a corner. The lost little girl had touched her soul. Emma felt lost herself. And helpless. If she ever found John there were so many things she

wanted to make right again.

Assistant Husslebeck appeared holding her coat. Blushing slightly, he covered her shoulders.

“Are you ready to go home, Mrs. Murdoch?”

Emma nodded to Bumstead’s sedan. “The inspector was going to take me . . .”

Husslebeck felt a twinge of envy as he watched her walk to Bumstead’s car. Emma Murdoch was the loveliest woman he’d ever met. John Murdoch was insane to leave her.

As Bumstead sat behind the wheel waiting, his mind kept revolving around the bizarre evidence he’d collected. A child’s drawing that matched a madman’s raving scrawl. A vanishing murder suspect. Spiral fingerprints. Seven mutilated hookers.

The accordion case lay open beside him and his fingers absently fingered the keyboard. Although deeply absorbed, Bumstead sensed someone watching and looked up.

Emma Murdoch smiled. “It’s beautiful.”

Embarrassed, Bumstead started packing up the splendidly crafted instrument. “It was a gift from my mother. She died recently. I keep it with me—reminds me of her . . .”

“I’m sorry,” Emma said huskily.

Bumstead nodded and smiled, knowing she meant it. He closed the lid and put the case on the backseat to make room for Emma.

“Funny, though,” he murmured, almost to himself, “I’ve forgotten *when* she gave it to me—how do you think I could forget a thing like that?”

He looked at Emma with an odd expression. “Do you think about the past much, Mrs. Murdoch?”

Emma glanced back at May’s building, her brain reeling. If Bumstead was losing his mind she didn’t have a chance. She looked at him, frightened.

“What’s happening, Inspector?”

Bumstead started the car. “I’m not sure I know anymore.”

He was lying. For the first time *he felt Walenski’s fear.*

13

Deep in the underworld was the Repository of Souls. Dr. Schreber's domain.

He sat at a table in the gloom, diligently mixing up a fresh batch of memories. He reached for another vial and froze, eyes wide—like a deer caught in headlights.

Mr. Book glared venomously. "What's *this,* Doctor?"

"A little experiment of my own," the little man stammered. "It's *nothing.*"

Mr. Book gave him a quizzical look. An experiment *of his own.* So like humans, yes. Retraining now became necessary.

"You have been in contact with Murdoch, yes?"

It wasn't a question. An acid terror boiled up in Schreber's belly and flooded through his pores, drenching his skin with burning sweat. He tried to speak but all he could manage was a bestial sputter.

Mr. Book's leathery features remained impassive but his eyes glinted like knives in the semidarkness. He gestured.

Without warning, Dr. Schreber was lifted up and spun around so he was left suspended—upside down—in midair.

The blood rushing into Schreber's skull seemed to loosen his tongue. "Yes—I mean no—That is . . . I saw him but we didn't speak . . ."

Mr. Book spun him around violently. "You think us fools, Schreber! Mr. Hand saw you! What one sees . . . we all see."

Schreber felt himself losing consciousness as he flailed helplessly above the ground. He heard Mr. Book's voice coming to him from far below.

"Why does he not *sleep* as the others do, Doctor? We take measures to ensure they *all* comply with our routine."

Instinctively Schreber realized they were uncertain. "Perhaps he's a step up in the evolutionary ladder," he offered, grasping at anything. "A freak of nature—he's *adapting* to survive."

Intrigued by the concept, Mr. Book lowered him closer. Unfortunately Schreber overplayed his hand. Brain flushed with blood and fear, he began ranting.

"You should be pleased—that's the purpose of your little zoo, isn't it? Maybe you've finally *found* what you're looking for and it's going to bite you on your—"

Mr. Book turned away as if indifferent, but Schreber had touched a nerve. Unlike humans the Strangers did not have an ability to *adapt.* Instead, they reordered time and space to *conform* to their needs.

A universe with no surprises. Eternally boring. With an impatient gesture he let Schreber fall to the floor like a sack of fruit.

"It requires a lifetime to master our gifts," Mr. Book reminded him sharply. "The idea that a simple man could develop the ability to Tune —"

"Is outrageous, I know," Schreber agreed hastily, sensing the ancient Stranger was unsure. "But what other explanation is there?"

Mr. Book circled Schreber like a snake about to strike. Then he leaned down close until they were eye to eye.

"He has tried to speak to you before, yes. Perhaps he will do so again."

Schreber nodded, unable to push the words through his throat. He felt himself strangling.

The deep *chiming* sound broke the vise on Schreber's throat. It was time for another Tuning . . .

Without hesitation Mr. Book hurried from the room, leaving Schreber huddled on the floor, sobbing with relief.

John Murdoch stood in the doorway and stared inside his old room. Mementos from his childhood. His past. And yet, he still couldn't connect.

"I left everything like it was," Uncle Karl assured him. "You can sleep here tonight."

Murdoch glanced back at the weird assortment of mounted sea creatures along the corridor. "What *exactly* is this place, Karl?"

Karl beamed proudly. "Oh, just the biggest money-spinning tourist attraction in the city, that's all."

The idea failed to penetrate Murdoch's crowded thoughts. He smiled and nodded awkwardly. Then he stepped inside the room and went to a small desk by the window.

A framed photograph of young Murdoch and his parents stood on the desk. Murdoch examined it for a few moments. Then he opened the desk drawer.

"Glad to have you back," Karl called from the doorway. "Even if it is for just a night." He spun his wheelchair and started down the hall.

Murdoch noticed a wall clock—*11:43.*

A sense of impending disaster dropped over him like a hangman's hood. Troubled, he glanced at the nearby window and saw it was dark

—darker than he'd ever seen—as if the moon and stars had never existed.

"Karl!"

Uncle Karl paused and half turned the wheelchair.

"Is that the right time?"

Karl lifted his brows as if surprised.

"Sure, that clock's kept perfect time since I bought it."

"Is that A.M. or P.M.?"

Karl's expression wavered from curiosity to fear. He looked at the window and the darkness outside. Then he looked back at John, finally convinced his nephew might be insane. He smiled sadly.

"What do *you* think, Johnny?"

"I don't get it." Murdoch shook his head. "I must have missed a day—that isn't possible."

Karl seemed relieved. "You're *tired,"* he sighed. "Anything's possible. Get some sleep. We'll straighten this all out tomorrow."

Murdoch wanted to believe him. He tried to smile as Karl waved good-night and rolled down the hall. He stood for a few moments, thoughts numb, until he happened to glance down at the open drawer.

Inside was a dog-eared drawing book. Printed on the cover was the title: "Guide to Shell Beach—By Johnny Murdoch Age 9."

He picked it up and idly flipped through the pages. Suddenly agitated, he began flipping faster and faster.

Murdoch gaped at the yellowing pages.

They were all utterly blank.

Down the hall, Uncle Karl nervously looked back at Murdoch's room before he shut the door to his study—and slowly reached for the phone . . .

As Emma opened the door to her apartment she heard the phone ringing. She hurried to answer, Bumstead right behind her.

"Hello?" she said hesitantly.

The taut lines in Emma's face softened as she listened to the voice on the other end. Bumstead stood nearby, straining to hear.

"I know—he's not himself," she said calmly. "Just keep him there, I'll be right over. Thank you, Karl."

Torn between relief and regret, Emma hung up and looked at Bumstead. He understood.

"I can't make any promises, Mrs. Murdoch. We'll just have to play it out as it comes."

Bumstead's pale blue eyes were clear but Emma knew he'd kill John if necessary. And if he did, it would be her fault. *But what other choice did she have?*

Finding no answer, Emma nodded wearily and headed for the door.

As Emma and Bumstead left the apartment the window curtains fluttered in the sudden draft. Standing behind them on the darkened fire escape was a tall, thin figure in black.

"Karl—Uncle Karl," Mr. Hand whispered with a triumphant smile. "Haven't seen you in so long, yes."

Mr. Hand's smile twisted as a sudden spasm wrenched his body. His gloved hands shook uncontrollably. It took a great effort of will to stop them.

But will alone couldn't help him now, Mr. Hand reflected gravely. He knew the symptoms well. The spasm was the first real sign of *rejection* of his human memories.

So *be it,* Mr. Hand thought. He stepped back off the fire escape and *floated up into the starless sky.*

Far below him, Emma and Bumstead left the building and walked quickly to Bumstead's car . . .

Deep in the belly of the city, the Tuning had begun.

The metal face dominating the Central Chamber split, and peeled away, revealing the Big Clock.

The Strangers gathered themselves below. Waiting. Finally Mr. Book appeared, his lined face impassive. His eyes shone like black crescent moons in a white sky.

Then he rose above their smooth skulls, floating toward the Big Clock.

"Let the Tuning commence!" Mr. Book called.

The Strangers circled the Pit—the massively knotted, eternally twisted roots of the city—and began the *Chanting.* Their voices swelled higher, filling the vast Chamber.

"Shut it down!"

Mr. Book's command sliced across the rising chant like a sword.

The gloved hand threw the switch.

Time stopped short.

Far above the Central Chamber, inside Neptune's Kingdom, Uncle Karl hung up the phone. He sensed someone watching and turned.

Murdoch stood in the doorway, clutching the blank scrapbook. He

had heard everything. There was no one he could trust. He spun around and headed for the stairs.

Karl followed, sweating from stress and exertion as he wheeled after Murdoch.

“Johnny, we just want to help,” he pleaded. “If you’re in some kind of trouble then . . .”

A thick silence filled the corridor.

Murdoch stopped and looked back. His breath froze.

Uncle Karl was slumped forward in his wheelchair, dead to the world.

Instinctively Murdoch glanced at the wall clock.

It was exactly *midnight.*

Outside, within sight of the garish sign proclaiming Neptune’s Kingdom, Bumstead’s car had stopped in the center of an intersection.

Bumstead lay slumped over the wheel. Emma leaned against the passenger door, fast asleep . . .

Had they been awake they would have seen the three tall, shadowy figures entering Karl’s building.

Fortunately Murdoch heard an oddly familiar creaking sound and went to the window. He pulled the curtain aside and glimpsed the three Strangers moving into the alley below. As if sensing his presence, the last one paused and looked up at the window.

The small, dark figure resembled a demonic child. Even at that distance Murdoch recognized Mr. Sleep.

They had come to kill him.

14

Heart booming with panic, Murdoch hurried downstairs and hid himself in an alcove behind a large shark tank.

The fluorescent glow from the glass tanks illuminated the tall, thin figures with their smooth white skulls as they entered the aquarium.

They slipped through the hall like ghosts moving directly for the stairway. Murdoch watched their distorted forms through the clouded water bubbling inside the tank. Leopard sharks glided back and forth in front of him. Lean. Efficient. Just like the predators hunting him.

Murdoch heard a sound and stopped breathing. One of the Strangers had stayed behind and was prowling between the tanks. Instinctively Murdoch knew which one, but he had to see. He lifted his head and scanned the area.

A childlike Stranger stood staring at the octopus tank a few feet away. Mr. Sleep. Murdoch glimpsed the dagger in his small hand.

Sensing something, Mr. Sleep turned and saw Murdoch's face through the hazy water. His childlike features resembled a white cat who'd just cornered a goldfish.

Dagger poised, Mr. Sleep eased closer.

Murdoch exploded.

He heaved the huge tank on its side. The glass shattered, unleashing a flood of water and flailing fish.

Mr. Sleep scuttled away in horror as a tide of water and flopping sharks lapped at his toes. An alien hiss whistled through his blue lips and he shrank back. He pressed against the wall as the water spread closer.

When the chance opened up, Murdoch leaped through, sprinting flat-out for an exit. He ran along the corridor and started climbing the stairs to the roof.

Suddenly the stairway above him expanded like an accordion, until the roof exit was far above him.

As if in a bad dream Murdoch kept climbing—and the exit kept moving out of reach. Stumbling, Murdoch forced himself to climb faster, at one point using his arms to *pull* himself higher.

Exhausted, he made it to the landing. He pushed through the hatch and crawled up the steep slope to the roof's rim. From there he had a bird's-eye view of the city's surreal metamorphosis. Like a caterpillar

evolving to butterfly, the steel and concrete skyline bent, expanded and changed on every side.

The roof next to Karl's building lifted. Murdoch measured the distance. He could make it. Steeling himself, he took a running start and . . .

Mr. Hand rose out of nowhere.

The white-skulled Stranger blocked Murdoch's leap, floating above the edge of the roof.

"Mr. Murdoch," he greeted effusively. "You have been the cause of much distress, yes."

As Mr. Hand spoke he advanced. At the last second Murdoch glimpsed the dagger and stumbled back.

The sharp blade cut the air inches from his nose. Mr. Hand lashed out, charging. Suddenly he stopped, body clutched in a painful spasm. *The rejection.* His hands began to shake.

Whap! Murdoch punched the Stranger across the jaw. As the tall, thin figure collapsed, the dagger dropped from his trembling fingers.

Murdoch scooped up the weapon. He lifted Mr. Hand from behind, one forearm squeezing his skinny neck—and the knife digging into his smooth white skull.

"There is no need for this," Mr. Hand said calmly.

Murdoch snorted. "Not if you start talking!"

Mr. Hand didn't struggle. "You cannot escape, Mr. Murdoch," he reasoned. "Look around you. You see what we are capable of."

Murdoch saw the elastic skyline shifting and changing like some sorcerer's empire. Turrets. Spires. Battlements. Towers. Steeples. All stretching into being.

"The city is *ours,"* Mr. Hand hissed triumphantly. "We *made* it."

"That's not possible."

Brain reeling, Murdoch's dagger wavered. The Stranger smiled, savoring the clash of human emotions.

"But it is. Each night we revise it, refine it, add or subtract elements as we see fit—all of this in order to learn."

Murdoch tightened his hold on Mr. Hand's throat. "Learn what?"

"About you, Mr. Murdoch. You and your fellow inhabitants. What makes you *human."*

"Why?"

Mr. Hand's voice was a strangled whisper.

"We want to *be* like you."

Stunned, Murdoch relaxed his grip a notch. He was desperately searching for a sane answer to an insane question. He wanted to

believe Mr. Hand.

The Stranger sensed Murdoch's need. He kept his voice low and soothing, as if comforting a child.

"I understand you, Mr. Murdoch—more than you do yourself. I remember what you do not. What you have been missing."

"No . . . !"

"The ocean, yes."

Murdoch's hold loosened.

Gently. Hypnotically. Mr. Hand continued.

"Running along the waves as a child. Meeting Emma at the river, walking her home through the park . . . the first kiss that followed." His flat gaze glittered intently.

A rush of emotions flooded Murdoch's awareness. Tears stung his eyes.

"I know your needs, Mr. Murdoch. I am the only one who truly understands you."

Murdoch's arm fell from Mr. Hand's throat. He started to lower the knife.

At that moment the roof they were standing on *shot upward* at a steep angle—pitching them both headlong down the sharp slope. Sliding over the edge, Murdoch dropped the knife and leaped onto the fire escape below.

Pain stabbed through his leg. Grabbing the rail, he pulled himself erect. Gingerly he put some weight on the throbbing limb. Wrenched but still functional.

A loud creaking jerked his head up. His mind staggered. All around him structures were evolving. Fast.

The building across the street was rapidly *pushing in* toward him like a runaway freight train. It was about to crush the fire escape *with him on it.* At the same time he glimpsed Strangers racing up the metal stairs.

With a desperate lunge, Murdoch smashed the window and bulled through the jagged hole . . .

Below him the three Strangers also paused to gape at *the building rapidly approaching.* Hastily they ducked into the nearest window. First Mr. Sleep, then Mr. Wall, and then Mr. Rain . . . whose long coat somehow got caught on the railing.

As Mr. Rain turned to pull his coat free the buildings collided and *fused together*—crushing his horrified scream . . .

Murdoch lurched around a darkened corridor and came to a dead end.

Through his racing heartbeat he could hear a scraping sound behind him. Like chalk on a blackboard.

He started down the hall and glimpsed a faint light through the steamy gloom. He broke into a run. But when he reached the door the handle refused to give.

The scraping noise grew louder. Insistent.

Mr. Sleep rounded the corner, running his long shiny knife along the concrete wall, a hellish smile fixed on his cherubic features.

Fear flooded Murdoch's limbs. He yanked the handle hard and shoved. The door flew open and he charged through . . .

. . . into nothingness!

He teetered, one foot dangling in midair with nowhere to go but twelve stories straight down. Then he fell.

Murdoch's hands clawed out and caught the edge of the doorway. He hauled himself up and saw Mr. Sleep, on hands and knees, crawling toward him.

A sudden gust slammed the door against Murdoch's shoulder and he slipped back, dazed. He glanced down and saw a brick chimney stack "growing" next to the building like a red vine. As it snaked toward him Murdoch scrambled to get inside.

Mr. Sleep loomed over him like a small white shark. Then he pounced, sinking his sharp fangs into Murdoch's hand.

Blood spattered Murdoch's face as he screamed in pain. He screamed again, hurling himself into space, feet kicking for the chimney-top.

They missed.

Wildly, he flailed out, and grabbed the rim of the rising chimney stack. Hanging on with everything he had, Murdoch rode the rumbling chimney up past Mr. Sleep to safety—like Jack clinging to a brickwork beanstalk . . .

Murdoch looked down triumphantly as Mr. Sleep became a tiny black dot. Moments later terror swallowed triumph as the red-brick chimney kept rising and weaving higher and higher. Uncoiling endlessly into the dark, empty sky.

"Please!" Murdoch cried, squeezing his eyes shut. "Please—stop!"

With a yawning shudder, the chimney *suddenly stopped.* Astonished, Murdoch tentatively dropped down to a nearby rooftop. He looked across the street and saw a clock. It was one minute past midnight.

Deep in the Central Chamber the Big Clock jolted to life. Its steady ticking echoed through the vast dome as the massive machines wound

down.

Far above, in the darkened city, all the watches and clocks started working again.

The ritual had ended.

As Murdoch watched through half-closed eyes the city underwent a final, subtle shift. The skyline seemed to shimmer and distort as if underwater. Then all was still.

Wearily, Murdoch lowered himself down the fire escape, leg pulsing painfully and body racked with exhaustion. When he dropped down, a bolt of agony shot from ankle to knee.

He turned and froze. Very slowly he sank to his knees, brain numb with despair.

He was back at Neptune's Kingdom.

And there were the Strangers, emerging from both sides of the building like large black beetles circling a dying animal.

Murdoch remained on his knees, too drained to care anymore.

Let them come, he thought feverishly. Let it just be over with . . .

15

Bumstead and Emma remembered nothing when they awakened. As if the car had momentarily stalled in the middle of the intersection.

Bumstead resumed driving, heedless of the city's transformation. As he turned the corner he saw the garish sign announcing Neptune's Kingdom. So did Emma, who straightened up in her seat and leaned foward.

Suddenly Bumstead squeezed the wheel tightly, unable to grasp what he saw through the windshield.

John Murdoch was kneeling on the street—about to be attacked by a pack of tall, menacing figures dressed in black. Tall. Thin. Wearing long black coats. Like the stick figures on Walenski's wall. Like the little girl's drawings.

They were real.

And they were moving in for the kill.

"There's John!"

Emma's cry was muffled by squealing tires as Bumstead gunned the accelerator, propelling his car into a screeching skid. The tall figures scurried back as Bumstead's cruiser jumped the sidewalk and lurched to a stop.

Bumstead rolled down the window and yelled at Murdoch. "Get in!"

Eyes wide, Murdoch crouched like a bird poised for flight. When he saw Emma his jaw went slack.

Murdoch glanced at the Strangers gathering to strike. The Lady or the Tiger?

He opted for the Lady and dove for the car, scrambling into the backseat as Bumstead threw it in reverse.

Both Mr. Sleep and Mr. Wall lunged at Murdoch, their clawing fingers inches from his dangling legs. But Mr. Hand extended his arm, signaling them to stay back. Confused, the Strangers watched as the car fishtailed into a tight spin, tires shrieking.

Heart pumping madly, Emma dazedly looked out the window and glimpsed a pale, *familiar face.*

Mr. Hand stared at her through the windshield.

For an instant their eyes locked. Then the car roared away. But as they sped through the darkness Emma remembered. The tall man she had met at the river—who seemed to know her secret thoughts . . .

The police interrogation room was starkly lit and uncomfortably furnished with a long steel table and a few metal folding chairs. A flyspecked two-way mirror decorated one wall. The rest were bare, except for some crude graffiti.

Murdoch sat at the table clutching a manila envelope while Bumstead paced back and forth. Two guards looked on with professional disinterest.

". . . there's more to this than just me," Murdoch insisted. "I've *told* you."

Bumstead shook his head. "So it's back to these characters who've been chasing you, right? The ones who fade into the woodwork?"

"You saw them. I *know* you did."

It was difficult to deny, having yanked Murdoch from their midst.

"Maybe," Bumstead conceded. "So who are they?"

"I don't know."

Bumstead slammed his hand on the desk. "What *do* you know?"

"I *know* I didn't kill those women . . ." Murdoch said firmly.

Bumstead smiled. "You don't *remember* killing them," he corrected. "There's a difference."

With a practiced flourish he dropped a stack of photographs in front of Murdoch. All grisly black-and-white shots of May's mutilated body.

"What about her, Murdoch? Ring any bells?"

Murdoch fumbled through the pictures then turned to Murdoch with wild, stricken eyes.

"She was *alive* when I left her!"

Bumstead snatched the manila envelope from Murdoch's hands and dumped the contents onto the table.

Murdoch stared at his "possessions"; a wallet, the postcard, keys, the snapshot of Emma—and the scrapbook "Guide to Shell Beach."

"What about this?" Bumstead demanded, picking up the scrapbook.

Murdoch shrugged. "It's nothing—I don't even know why I took it."

"Must've meant something," Bumstead speculated, thumbing through the pages, "all these pictures . . ."

Murdoch's face registered confusion, surprise, and disbelief. "What pictures?"

Bumstead turned the scrapbook and fanned it open to show Murdoch page after page of *colorful drawings.* The same pages that were blank a few hours before.

Murdoch took the book and leafed through it. There were pictures of Uncle Karl, Mom and Dad, sailboats, various sea creatures . . . sunshine . . .

“I don’t understand, I—”

Bumstead pounded the desk. “Stop playing games with me, Murdoch! Stop giving me lies!”

“I’m not lying!”

Murdoch’s anguished cry deflated Bumstead’s attack. He was beginning to believe the poor bastard, Bumstead reflected wearily. He took a deep breath and signaled to the guards to leave. As soon as they were gone he turned back to his murder suspect.

“Help me out here, Murdoch,” he said gently. “Make me understand. I’ve got this jigsaw puzzle in front of me—no matter how many times I try to rearrange the pieces I still can’t make any sense out of it.”

A faint smile broke through Murdoch’s haunted expression. “And you think I can? Believe me, Inspector, I’m as much in the dark as you are.”

Bumstead sighed. It was probably true. But he had to be sure.

Murdoch leaned forward. “Let me ask *you* a question—have you ever heard of Shell Beach?”

Bumstead squinted at him curiously. “Sure.”

“Do you know how to get there? Can you tell me?”

“Well, yeah,” Bumstead said, unsure of Murdoch’s point. “You just, uh . . .”

His voice trailed off as he racked his brain for specific details. He started to point in a certain direction but his hand wavered in midair. He couldn’t remember.

“Hold on a minute,” Bumstead murmured.

“You don’t remember, do you?” Murdoch said triumphantly. “Don’t you find that a little odd?”

Sensing he had Bumstead’s attention, Murdoch pressed his advantage. “The one thing I’ve been *sure* of, all this time, is that I *have* to get to the ocean. I don’t know why, I just feel”—he shook his head helplessly—“I’ll find the answers I’m looking for there.”

Murdoch’s tormented eyes stared at Bumstead.

“But I *can’t get there,”* he whispered. “No one seems to know the way.”

Ridiculous, Bumstead thought. But he still couldn’t recall how to get to Shell Beach. It would come to him in a minute, he told himself.

“Wait, I’ve got a better one for you—when was the last time you remember doing something in the daylight?”

Murdoch’s question rang like a gong through his mind. Bumstead stiffened.

“What do you mean?”

A rueful smile crossed Murdoch’s face. *“Daylight,* Bumstead. You know, *the sun . . . ?”* Then the smile faded.

“When was the last time you remember seeing it? I’m not talking about some distant half-forgotten childhood memory—I mean *yesterday,* or last week.”

Bumstead knew he was wrong. Obviously. It was a simple question. Absurd, really. But God help him, he was thinking and thinking and . . . *drawing a blank.*

Murdoch moved closer. “Think about it for a minute. *Really think.* Can you come up with a single memory?”

He was right in Bumstead’s face now, eyes gleaming intently. “You can’t, can you? I don’t think the sun even exists in this place. I’ve been up for hours and hours—the *night never ends here.”*

Frustration and rage smothered Bumstead’s bewilderment. He shook his head angrily. “What are you talking about? That’s crazy . . .”

“You’re damned right it is!” Murdoch said, eyes bright as if he revealed the great secret. “Don’t you see, Bumstead? It’s not just me. It’s *all of us.* They’re doing something to all of us.”

A cold fear washed over Bumstead. He didn’t want to wind up like Walenski, cowering in his room. He stepped back, brain imploding.

“Shut up. Just shut up for a minute.”

But Murdoch was too revved up to notice.

“Listen to me, Bumstead . . .” he demanded.

Suddenly Bumstead snapped. He grabbed Murdoch’s shirt and slammed him against the wall.

“SHUT UP!”

Bumstead gave Murdoch a violent shake, then released him and turned away. “There has to be some kind of explanation here,” he said calmly, as if nothing had happened.

“Explain *this,”* Murdoch rasped.

When Bumstead looked back his calm shattered.

His notebook was *floating in midair* between the two of them. Somehow he knew Murdoch was holding it there. Controlling it with his mind.

Bumstead stared, his terror laced with awe . . .

The visiting room at the police station was only slightly better than the interrogation room. The harsh light bounced off the glass barrier that separated visitor from prisoner. And the dirty white walls smelled of tragedy.

Emma was already waiting when they led Murdoch inside. Even in the sickly light she looked lovely.

The guards sat Murdoch in a chair then stepped back to the wall. Emma tried to smile, lower lip trembling. She reached her hand out to the glass.

Murdoch couldn't quite bring himself to reciprocate the gesture.

Emma clenched her fingers. "I don't know what to say, John." She looked away. "You make me feel like I'm not—*me* anymore."

Her emotions broke through and she began sobbing softly.

Moved, Murdoch pressed his hand against the glass, trying to reach her in some way. "Emma . . ." he said gently.

She lifted her head and looked at him with tear-stained eyes. "This is all my fault. I never meant to hurt you, John. You have to believe that. I'd take everything back if I could."

But Murdoch was only half listening—odd pieces of the puzzle were dropping into place for him. He was beginning to figure it out. He looked up and smiled.

"You didn't do it, Emma. This . . . affair of yours, whatever it was supposed to be—I don't think it ever *really happened."*

She blinked at him, trying to understand.

"What . . . ?"

Murdoch leaned very close to the glass barrier, his deep-set eyes burning with intensity. He was on the verge of something now, he could feel it.

"Emma, I know all this seems insane," he said urgently, "but what if . . . we never knew each other before now?"

The last seven words punctured Emma's brain like darts. She knew he meant it literally.

"I mean *really,"* he said, as if reading her thoughts. "What if we met for the first time last night in your . . . *our* apartment?"

Murdoch smiled ruefully. "Everything you remember—I'm supposed to have remembered—never happened. Someone just wants us to *think* that it did."

Emma's mind struggled with the idea but in her heart she knew it was true.

"Back at the apartment you asked me why I believed you," Emma blurted out hastily. "I said because I *know* you. But I was lying . . . I suddenly felt I *didn't* know you at all. It was like you were a stranger . . ."

She leaned closer to the glass, her smoky eyes questioning. Tormented.

“How can that be, John, when I so vividly remember meeting you? I remember falling in love—I remember losing you . . .”

Sensing the depth of her passion, Murdoch wished he could offer her some answers. Rather than painful questions.

“But I love you,” Emma insisted. “I *know* that I do. You can’t fake something like that.”

Murdoch was searching for something to say that would ease her anguish, when a heavyset cop entered. The cop nodded to the two guards, who moved to take Murdoch away.

“Wait, wait,” Emma pleaded, getting up. “Just another minute, *please!”*

Murdoch stared at her, realizing for the first time how genuine her need for him really was. And oddly enough, his need for her was just as strong. His emotions began to churn, like black clouds circling a vortex.

“I understand how . . . how we could have been happy together,” he said, breath heaving.

Emma leaned close, eyes glowing. “We can be happy again, John—I *know* we can.”

Her voice jolted his senses and suddenly he felt the raw power surge from spine to brain . . .

Without warning, the thick glass that divided them shattered! Startled, the guards scrambled back as the pulverized barrier dropped like a curtain.

Emma and Murdoch moved toward each other, drawn by a wave of energy that engulfed them both. When they kissed, the power escalated.

It took both guards to pull Murdoch away, but as they struggled to get him to his cell, he kept breaking free to look back at Emma . . .

16

Bumstead huddled in the familiar confines of his office, shaken by his conversation with Murdoch. He kept studying Murdoch's postcard of Shell Beach as if it held the answer. But he still couldn't remember how to get there.

Nor could he explain his notebook floating in midair. Or the tall, thin men in black. Or the goddamn glass partition vaporizing.

Or seven brutally murdered hookers, he reminded himself, rubbing his tired eyes.

Husslebeck came in behind him. Bumstead knew he was there but he didn't look up. His young assistant waited a few awkward moments then cleared his throat.

"Inspector? We, uh . . . just got word. Detective Walenski killed himself last night." He shuffled uncomfortably. "I thought you should know."

Bumstead nodded absently. The news only convinced him that what he was about to do was right.

Husslebeck lingered in the doorway.

"The chief wanted to see you."

Bumstead dimly realized he meant right away. There wasn't much time. Wearily, he got up from his desk.

Husslebeck beamed at him proudly. "I knew you'd track the killer down, sir."

Bumstead gave him a strange little smile. But he didn't seem to hear what Husslebeck was saying. He walked out of the office and strode purposefully down the corridor.

Husslebeck hurried after him. "Sir . . . ?"

Bumstead paused.

Reluctantly, Husslebeck pointed at Bumstead's shoelace. Untied.

With a grave expression Bumstead carefully tied his shoe and moved smartly down the hall.

Not good, he told himself as he marched to the holding cells. It was a bad omen . . .

Late at night the station's reception desk was deserted except for the sergeant on duty and a couple of officers taking a coffee break.

The sergeant was engrossed in his crossword puzzle when the three men in black entered. Mr. Hand, closely followed by Mr. Sleep and Mr. Wall, moved swiftly to the desk.

The sergeant sensed someone approaching and started to look up. “How can we help you, sir?”

Mr. Hand pressed his palm against the sergeant’s forehead. “You can . . . *sleep.”*

Instantly the desk sergeant slumped forward.

Before the other two cops could react, Mr. Wall put them to sleep as well.

Quickly the three strangers began moving into the inner offices . . .

Chief Stromboli was studying a flowchart pinned to the wall when he heard Bumstead open the door. Stromboli glanced at his watch and waved him inside.

“Bumstead—I wanted to be the first to congratulate you about this case—”

But it wasn’t Bumstead.

Stromboli’s jaw dropped when he saw the three men in black. Suddenly one of them grabbed his fleshy throat and pushed a dagger against his jugular vein.

“Take us to Murdoch,” Mr. Hand said calmly.

Sweating, Stromboli nodded. He took them to a short stairway that led to the main holding cell. As they went upstairs and walked the long corridor Stromboli kept looking for help—but the station seemed deserted.

Hands clammy, Stromboli fumbled for his keys. They must be some weird cult, he speculated wildly. Come to spring Murdoch.

Finally he managed to unlock the cell door and stumbled inside. The men in black filled the doorway behind him. Frantically, Stromboli looked around.

Murdoch was gone.

Mr. Hand didn’t ask any questions. With one angry slice he cut Stromboli’s throat and left him there to die . . .

* * *

Dr. Schreber loved his nightly swim.

He paddled slowly in the steamy water, head bobbing just above the surface, feeling totally insulated from them. His beady eyes glanced at the clock on the tiled wall. Soon it would be time.

"Dr. Schreber . . ."

A familiar voice echoed across his thoughts. Schreber turned and saw Murdoch at the side of the pool.

"I knew you'd come eventually," Schreber sighed.

Murdoch was oddly calm. "I think it's time you gave me some answers."

"Yes, of course."

Schreber paddled to the metal steps and climbed out of the pool. Wrapping himself in a towel, he followed Murdoch into the changing room.

Schreber moved to a locker.

"Won't you sit down?" he asked, waving at a nearby chair.

Exhausted, Murdoch sank back in the wooden chair as if it were a sofa. Schreber began getting dressed.

"I come here often," Schreber confided. "It's one of the few places I'm allowed a moment's peace."

He glanced around nervously then leaned closer to Murdoch. "They have an aversion to water, you know. I suppose one could even call it a phobia—"

"I didn't come here for a dose of shrink talk, Schreber," Murdoch snapped impatiently. "Who *are* they? Why do they want me?"

Schreber picked up his shirt and put it on.

"Let's just say for now you've been involved in an experiment." He smiled and buttoned his collar. "You're not crazy, John . . . You're not a murderer."

He pulled his leather bag from the locker and reached inside. When his hand reappeared it was clutching a pistol.

Murdoch stiffened.

"I'm sorry about this," Schreber said quickly. "I truly am, but we don't have much time and I can't afford the luxury of doing this the right way."

With his free hand Schreber reached back into his leather bag. This time he came up with a large glass syringe.

"Everything you need to know—all the answers are in this syringe. You have a gift, John. An ability to make things happen by willpower alone . . ."

Schreber kept his gun trained on Murdoch.

"Haven't you noticed odd events occurring around you?" he asked smugly. "Objects moving of their own accord? Your physical surroundings changing? *They* call it *Tuning."*

Murdoch shrugged, unimpressed. Schreber wasn't telling him much

he didn't already know.

Frustrated, Schreber leaned forward and set the syringe down on a bench between them. "I need you to inject yourself," he declared briskly. "It's the *only* way to make you understand."

"You've got to be kidding me."

Something about Murdoch's mocking stare made Schreber nervous. He motioned with the gun.

"Do it, John. You *must* hurry."

A burst of movement shattered the quiet as Bumstead kicked open the door, both hands gripping a revolver.

"Drop it, Schreber!"

Schreber seemed confused. He smiled at Bumstead.

"Inspector . . . he's more disturbed than I thought."

A metallic click cut him off as Bumstead cocked his revolver and aimed it at Schreber's head.

"Save it, Doctor. You're talking to the nutcase who just busted him *out* of jail."

Numbly Schreber realized the two were in collusion and dropped his pistol. His belly twisted with fear as he watched Bumstead scoop it up.

"Please," he said feverishly, "you don't understand . . ."

Murdoch picked up the syringe and studied it. The metallic object looked vaguely futuristic—part hypo, part ray gun. "What is this, Schreber? *Really?"*

Schreber's face twitched. "The answers you've been looking for . . . I *swear* to you!"

"Then I'll just hold on to it for safekeeping, if you don't mind."

Murdoch tucked the syringe inside his coat pocket. Bumstead grabbed Schreber by the elbow and pushed him toward the door.

"Where . . . where are we going?" Schreber rasped.

Bumstead regarded him gravely. "Shell Beach." He glanced at Murdoch. "That's where you wanted to go, isn't it? The ocean?"

Driving at high speed through the darkened streets, Bumstead sensed an odd exhilaration . . . Now that everything in his well-ordered life had disintegrated, he felt *released.* For the first time he felt totally alive.

Unaware of his epiphany, Murdoch sat silent, studying an assortment of maps by the light of the open glove compartment. Finally he crushed the map in disgust and looked at Bumstead.

“It’s like I told you—there isn’t a map of the city that extends far enough to show the ocean . . .”

Dr. Schreber huddled behind them in the backseat, shivering like one of the rats trapped in his maze.

“You won’t find anything there, I promise you,” Schreber blurted out desperately. “I’ve been there and—”

He clamped his jaw shut but it was too late. He’d already said too much.

Murdoch pounced. “If you’ve been there, then you can show us the way, can’t you? We’ll see for ourselves.”

Schreber crossed his arms like a sullen child. “I won’t. I refuse. You can’t make me go there.”

“Oh, no?” Murdoch stared at Schreber, focusing his anger like a laser. Suddenly Schreber’s glasses distorted, digging into the pudgy skin around his eyes. The lenses pushed against his gaping eyeballs—then cracked!

The wire rims began to twist like snakes, coiling tight around his ears . . . Schreber panicked as the metal frames pushed into his skin, bursting the blood vessels around his eyes. He began to groan in terror and clutch at his blood-streaked face.

“Are you doing that?” Bumstead asked, with an incredulous smile.

His question broke the spell. Murdoch grinned proudly, somewhat amazed by his own prowess—considering it was a trial run.

“You were saying, Doctor . . .” Murdoch asked.

Schreber didn’t answer, too intent on prizing the warped wire from his bloody cheeks.

They kept driving for a long time. Finally Bumstead swerved to a stop. Bumstead got out of the car, closely followed by Murdoch and Dr. Schreber. The road had ended in a cul-de-sac by the canal. The way was barred by iron stanchions gleaming dully in the glare of the headlights.

Bumstead looked around and shook his head.

“There used to be a bridge here,” he said, almost to himself.

Murdoch gave him a rueful smile. He was becoming quite familiar with the problem. Then he looked past Bumstead and noticed a rowboat moored to the pier nearby. *A rowboat.* The Strangers didn’t like water.

He heard a quick scuttling noise and turned in time to see Schreber making a break for it. Arms and legs flailing, the psychiatrist awkwardly ran toward the street like a crab on its hind legs.

A moment later Bumstead and Murdoch sprinted after him.

Bumstead caught up to Schreber easily and brought him down with a flying tackle.

Bumstead rolled over on top of Schreber and, as Murdoch arrived, began violently shaking the little man.

"No more tricks!" Bumstead warned, his teeth clenched and his face flushed with fury. "You're going to tell us what we want to know or I'm gonna *beat* it out of you."

Murdoch believed him. So did Dr. Schreber.

The little man began to sob breathlessly, his cheeks streaked bright pink with tears and blood.

"All right, all right, I'll tell you!" He rolled his eyes wildly, gaping at Murdoch like a landed fish. "I'll *tell you everything!"*

Then he squeezed his eyes shut, slowly shaking his head in resignation, his breath coming in ragged gasps.

"It doesn't matter anymore . . ." he sobbed. "It's hopeless anyway." He slowly opened his eyes and looked up at the moonless sky. "Oh, God . . ."

Both Bumstead and Murdoch reached down to pull Schreber to his feet. It had been a long time since anyone had mentioned God.

Emma wished John and Inspector Bumstead hadn't left her behind. She felt safer with them—no matter where they were going, Emma brooded, as she entered her apartment building.

Ever since she'd seen the white face staring at her through the windshield, Emma had had an oppressive sense of doom. She prayed John would come back unharmed.

As Emma unlocked her door she kept thinking about the man she'd met at the river. The same man who'd tried to kill John. And she kept circling back to the same question: how could he know her so well?

Emma stepped inside and her heart froze.

Stunned, she gaped at the completely barren room. Her apartment had been *stripped bare of every possession, every single item.* Sofa, chair, rug, books, photos, flowers, magazines, letters, stamps—everything.

Gone. As if all traces of her existence had been sucked away by a giant vacuum cleaner.

Reeling between disbelief and fear, Emma stumbled inside. She heard a shuffle behind her and turned. Too late.

There were two of them, standing on either side of the door. Their pale features and smooth skulls were very similar to those of the man she'd met at the river. Yet they seemed different. Less . . . human. One of them had a clipboard.

A burst of anger cut through her fear. “What happened here?” she demanded. “Who are you people?”

Mr. Wall stepped forward, his crescent eyes bright. “Please stay calm,” he droned. “We will give you some more pretty things soon”—he checked his clipboard—“Anna.”

The name bounced off Emma’s brain. “But I’m not Anna . . .”

Mr. Wall smiled. “You will be soon, yes.”

Emma circled slowly, keeping them in front of her. The door was still open. If she moved fast she might be able to make it.

She backed toward the door and whirled . . .

Suddenly Emma sagged, all resistance, all hope, instantly drained by the familiar figure in black looming over her.

Mr. Hand grabbed her wrists, clutching them tightly in his large, gloved fist.

“I have another use for her first,” he confided, voice cutting the emptiness like a razor.

17

It was pitch-black out on the water, like floating through a tunnel. Murdoch and Bumstead sat in the middle of the rowboat manning the oars. Dr. Schreber lay slumped over the prow, body limp. Beyond any hope of salvation.

Schreber began to speak, voice low and far away.

"First there was darkness . . ." he intoned. "Then came—the Strangers."

As Murdoch listened, Schreber's words circled his mind, dredging up images like debris from a shipwreck.

Murdoch lying naked in a tub of water—asleep—in the dingy hotel bathroom. The door opens.

Schreber enters and kneels beside the tub. He takes a glass syringe from his leather bag . . .

Bumstead kept rowing intently, waiting for Schreber to spill his guts. Experience told him the moment was at hand.

Dr. Schreber felt it too. A kind of mounting dread was welling up inside him. He tried, but couldn't stop himself from blurting all of it. And when he did, he felt strangely relieved.

As they approached the other bank Schreber made a sweeping gesture with his arm. "The city and everyone in it is their experiment. They mix and match our memories as they see fit."

Schreber squinted at Bumstead. "One day a man might be an inspector, the next he might be someone entirely different."

Bumstead looked away and concentrated on rowing.

"When they want to study a *murderer,* for instance . . ."

Schreber's reedy voice stirred a flurry of images. Memories.

Dr. Schreber beside the tub, lifting the syringe, carefully pressing the plunger to eject any air bubbles . . .

". . . they simply Imprint one of their citizens with a new personality."

Emma being positioned in bed. The Strangers check various details about the room then file out . . .

"They arrange a family for him, friends, an entire history—even a lost wallet."

A pair of Strangers place Karl in a wheelchair. A book is carefully placed in his lap . . .

The dingy hotel. Mr. Hand and his associates are "set dressing." They carry the woman's corpse inside, and arrange her on the floor. Mr. Quick sets a pair of shiny new shoes by the chair. Mr. Hand places the suitcase and raincoat in the closet.

And lastly, Mr. Sleep crouches over the corpse with his long, shiny knife, his pale features pursed in childlike concentration as he begins to carve spirals into the dead woman's flesh.

"Then they observe the results," Schreber went on, voice rising. "Will a man, given the history of a killer, continue in that vein? Or are we *more* than the mere sum of our memories?"

His question drifted across the darkness.

Mr. Sleep is finished. He wipes off his bloody knife and leaves the room . . .

"But you were *especially* different," Schreber snapped.

Murdoch glanced up and saw Schreber glaring at him indignantly.

"You resisted my attempt to Imprint you."

Suddenly the images darted across his mind like startled fish.

Schreber pushes the long needle directly into Murdoch's forehead—but just as he presses the plunger the syringe is plucked from his hand and hurled across the room!

The syringe smashes against the tiles . . .

Murdoch begins to stir . . .

Schreber in a blind panic backs away, bumping into the lightbulb as he beats a hasty retreat . . .

As the lightbulb swings above him, Murdoch struggles to life . . .

Bumstead silently listened to Schreber's fragmented confession, not wanting to believe it but not able to question it.

"But why do they want me dead?" Murdoch asked suddenly.

Schreber smiled. "You're unique among us, John. Somehow you've developed their ability to *Tune.* They're afraid of you." His smile faded as he realized he'd said too much.

Murdoch stiffened. "You work for them . . ."

It wasn't a question, it was a threat.

Schreber nodded, shivering as a cold wind whipped across the water. "When we arrived they *extracted* what was in us so they could *store* the information, reproduce it, reinterpret it, *remix* it like so much paint. But they still needed an artist . . . to help them."

Schreber drew himself up proudly, as if that justified his actions. *"I* developed the technique of Imprinting—but *they* applied it to human beings. They brought me here and put me to work for them."

Deep in the underworld. A young Dr. Schreber is seated at his workbench

—surrounded by Strangers. He seems terrified as he works on the vials of memories before him. Tears run down his cheeks . . .

"They needed someone to smooth over the cracks, gloss over the more obvious—to us anyway—inconsistencies in the *new* memories they gave *back* to us. They allowed me to keep my skills as a scientist because they *needed* them—but they made me *delete* everything else."

A loud bump signaled the boat had made it to shore. They were at the outskirts of the city.

Schreber looked at them, expression bitter. Tears of horror and loss flooded his bleary eyes.

"Do you know what that feels like—being forced to throw away your own past?" Schreber demanded, face twitching. "To be the only one who knows the truth? The only one who knows that the night never ends?"

Bumstead thought about Walenski. He should have tried to help Walenski instead of discarding him, Bumstead brooded, laying down his oar. Then his mind went back to something Dr. Schreber had said.

Murdoch's brain reeled drunkenly, unable to grasp what Schreber was telling him. The images he'd seen.

"What about my childhood?" he blurted out. "Shell Beach . . . Uncle Karl . . ."

Murdoch held out his scrapbook, riffling the colorful scrawled pages for Schreber to see.

"And this—it was blank when I found it!"

Schreber shook his head sadly. "Mr. Murdoch, you still don't see. You were never a boy—not in this place. Your entire *history* is an illusion, a *fabrication.* As it is with *all* of us."

He pointed at the scrapbook in Murdoch's hand.

"You made those drawings *happen*—with your gift."

Murdoch seemed not to hear him. "What do they want from us?"

Schreber smiled, as if he'd been waiting for Murdoch to ask the question. "It's our capacity for *individuality*—that's what they hope to understand. It's what makes us different from them."

The little man tapped his skull. "All they have are collective memories—they're a group mind. They want a soul, John, a *human* soul . . . it's what they lack."

From the shadows Bumstead broke his long silence. "When we arrived . . ." he repeated, echoing Schreber's words. "From where?"

Schreber shrugged. "None of us remember that. What we once were —what we might have been . . ."

With a deep sigh the little man peered up at the black, starless sky.

“Somewhere else,” he whispered.

Seen from the air, the bleak outskirts of the city appeared strangely incomplete. Buildings without windows or doors. Streets with no direction. One area was a spiral of alleys—like Schreber’s rat maze.

At the tail of the spiral was a narrow road winding away from the water. And three figures moving through the most forbidding section of the city. Desolate. Toxic.

Bumstead’s apprehension escalated with every step. He hated the neighborhood, if one could call it that. It really looked like a dumping ground for aborted buildings. He gripped his revolver for reassurance. It didn’t help.

Dr. Schreber was also having a difficult time. He acted more frightened than ever, eyes darting about like a lost mouse. Suspicious of every shadow.

If Murdoch was scared he didn’t show it, Bumstead observed. John led the way, hooded eyes coolly appraising the terrain. As if on a mission.

Abruptly, Schreber paused and looked to Murdoch. Bumstead nudged him forward with his revolver.

“Don’t make me go in there,” Schreber pleaded. “I’ve taken you this far. You don’t need me anymore.”

Bumstead shared his reluctance.

The narrow road led to a windowless building with only one door, which was walled in on every side by similar structures. All without windows or doors. Very little light trickled into the alley and the shadows loomed like giant trees.

Without hesitation Murdoch moved to the door.

Schreber tried to back away but Bumstead grabbed his arm and half dragged him into the alley. Despite his show of power Bumstead felt helpless—as if being manipulated by some alien puppetmaster.

Murdoch opened the door. Inside was a dimly lit stairway. Led by Murdoch, the three of them slowly began climbing.

At the top of the stairs was a long corridor that led to a door. As they approached, Bumstead thought he could hear the muffled rush of surf. A faint cry of seagulls.

Murdoch heard it too. He hurried to the door and flung it open. And there it was—the ocean. Big blue sky. They had made it. He grinned at Bumstead.

A moment later his elated grin crumbled. As Bumstead watched, Murdoch reached out and *touched the view!*

It wasn't real.

The beach, the sky, were nothing more than a garishly painted wall —a billboard to be exact.

As Bumstead neared he saw a smiling girl and the slogan Welcome to Shell Beach. The billboard was wedged tightly against the door. There was nowhere else to go.

Bumstead glanced at Schreber and saw silent tears sliding down the little man's face.

"There is no ocean, John," Schreber intoned, as if reciting a prayer. "There is nothing beyond the city. The only place 'home' exists is in your head. I'm sorry . . ."

The little man bowed his head and backed away.

Murdoch kept staring at the billboard, his frustration spilling over into rage. Without warning, he attacked the poster, clawing at it with his hands.

He dug his fingers into the ancient mortar of the wall and began tearing away small pieces. Feverishly he looked around the littered floor for a tool and came up with a length of pipe. Using the pipe, he hammered at the wall, gasping with each blow.

Schreber covered his ears and sank to his knees, sobbing. "Stop this! Oh, God, *please stop!* Please . . . please . . ."

Bumstead wavered, wondering if Murdoch had gone mad. Then he remembered Walenski and joined Murdoch's pursuit.

Side by side the two men ripped out chunks of crumbling bricks, tearing away the painted sky as Schreber wailed in terror.

Suddenly Bumstead sensed a change in Murdoch.

He turned and glimpsed Murdoch's face. His deep-set eyes seemed fixed on a point on the other side of the moldering wall. And his stony features radiated an aura of fierce energy. Bumstead could feel it, like a white-hot blast from a steel furnace.

At that instant a whole section of the wall exploded—blowing outward to reveal . . . *a vast expanse of black space and twinkling stars!*

Caught off balance, Bumstead tumbled through the sudden hole, hands scrabbling for purchase. His frantic fingers clutched the remnants of the wall and he dangled on the brink of eternity.

As Bumstead strained to pull himself up, Murdoch reached for his hand—and for one fractured moment they both glimpsed the real shape of the city . . .

The gigantic hive of buildings sat on a colossal floating platform. Beneath it was a massive conical maze of gnarled pipes, twisted wires, machines, belts, gears, infernal devices, and surreal structures—all hovering against an endless sweep of glittering stars.

Brain skidding, Bumstead felt himself slipping into space until Murdoch grabbed his wrist and pulled him to safety.

Choking with panic and disbelief, Bumstead struggled to regain control. He saw Murdoch standing at the opening, gaping at the immensity beyond.

“And now you know the truth.”

They jerked around like puppets on a string and saw a tall, smooth-skulled figure emerge from the shadows.

Mr. Hand held Emma in front of him—a knife pressed against her ivory throat.

Gibbering madly, Schreber scuttled across the rubbled ground, trying to hide. Behind Mr. Hand more Strangers were stepping into view.

Bumstead raised his gun and fired.

The bullet hit the Stranger beside Mr. Hand, cleanly piercing the lens on his glasses. Removing his shattered glasses, the Stranger gingerly inspected the ragged hole where his eye used to be.

Otherwise the shot had zero effect.

Devastated by the total collapse of his neat, well-ordered reality, Bumstead let the revolver fall from his nerveless fingers. He stood there, reeling.

Hot pain seared his awareness. He blinked and saw a pale childlike face appear from behind him.

As Mr. Sleep yanked the blood-greased dagger from his back, Bumstead pitched forward.

“Bumstead!” Murdoch yelled. Too late.

Spurting blood like a sperm whale, Bumstead stumbled, twisted, and fell back *through the hole in the wall*—and *away* into the eternal darkness . . .

Murdoch glimpsed the horrified disbelief on Bumstead’s face as he tumbled into oblivion—dwindling smaller and smaller—until he was swallowed by the sea of stars.

Behind him the Strangers were edging closer.

Murdoch shuffled back, looking from Mr. Hand to Mr. Sleep. He began to focus.

“Any attempt to use your . . . talents, Mr. Murdoch, will result in this one’s death, yes,” Mr. Hand reminded, gripping Emma tighter.

Murdoch glanced at Emma and saw the raw fear glazing her eyes. He forced himself to look away—directly into Mr. Hand’s flat, empty gaze.

“What do I care?” Murdoch said calmly. “She’s not *really* my wife—

she's no one to me."

Emma looked up, stung by his words. Her sense of betrayal was as palpable as an open wound. Suddenly Murdoch understood the depth of her love for him.

Mr. Hand saw it as well. "No one, yes," he said, pressing the blade deeper. "But you *still care,* don't you, Mr. Murdoch?"

Murdoch didn't answer.

A drop of blood began to trickle down Emma's smooth ivory throat.

Mr. Hand watched him impassively. "I have become the monster you were intended to be—shall I end her life, as you would have?"

The question flared in the shadowy silence.

As Mr. Hand drew the blade back, Murdoch caved in. "No—please," he said wearily, "don't hurt her."

Mr. Hand nodded. A whisper of a smile crossed his lips.

"You will allow yourself to surrender, Mr. Murdoch . . . *Sleep now."*

All resistance drained from Murdoch's mind and body—defeated by the very humanity he tried to deny. Mr. Hand called his bluff. And Murdoch had lost everything. He had lost his soul . . .

He allowed Mr. Hand's command to take hold of him. To carry him out from his body. He felt his legs grow weak as the world began to slip away.

"Johnnn . . . !"

The last thing he heard was Emma's voice crying out to him.

And then nothing.

18

It was a descent into hell.

Level after level of barren darkness. Endless gray caverns devoid of hope. The bowels of despair.

In a fevered daze, Murdoch was dimly aware of being hauled aboard one of the strange carts rumbling through the underworld. Moving through a subterranean landscape of massive machinery.

Murdoch kept slipping in and out of consciousness . . . Nightmarish images of the Strangers at work flickered through the haze. Frightening glimpses of the inner lairs beyond the tunnels. Seething nests. Venomous eggs. Predatory spawn grazing on living flesh.

A scream pierced his awareness. Murdoch opened his eyes. Groggily he looked around.

The horror ate through his stupor like acid.

A never-ending succession of naked human bodies were being processed. The humans lay strapped to a huge conveyer belt, being fed to an insectlike machine with multiple arms. At the end of each arm was a shiny chrome needle.

As each human passed under the machine, one of the needles drilled into his forehead—*removing* some sort of fluid. For a hallucinogenic instant the machine looked like the ancient Kali, eight-armed Goddess of Death.

Various Strangers shuffled along the conveyor, like black-robed monks, overseeing the operation.

Instinctively Murdoch realized that this was where all humans were being converted. Their memories bulk erased. Their souls stolen.

Humanity was being processed like so much canned meat to feed an alien race which had no dreams. Only eternal nightmares.

Dimly Murdoch recognized Emma among the line of bodies. She was strapped down to the conveyor belt, wide awake, eyes pleading as the needle dipped down toward her skull . . .

As Murdoch struggled to rouse himself, to focus his powers, Mr. Hand's pale features loomed over him.

"Sleep," Mr. Hand said softly.

Murdoch sank back into the frigid darkness like a drowning man.

When Murdoch awoke again his vision was blurred. He tried to rub his eyes and found his limbs were strapped down to an operating table of some sort.

High above him were the smudged outlines of a huge carved face. He turned and saw a number of tall figures come into focus. A group of Strangers were gathered around the table and began to examine him as if he were a laboratory animal.

Their leader, Mr. Book, watched with wary interest as they poked, pinched, and probed his body. In particular, the Strangers seemed fascinated with his spiral fingerprints, which they studied through a magnifying lens.

"The doctor was right," someone said. "He *has* evolved. Look at his hands."

Murdoch weakly tugged at his restraints. He was beginning to recover his senses.

"Kill him!"

The high-pitched cry whined like a dentist's drill. Murdoch looked up and saw a childlike figure pointing at him. Mr. Sleep.

A chorus of dry whispers took up the call.

"Kill him, kill him . . ."

Mr. Book raised his cane, silencing them. The ancient Stranger looked around the chamber, his eyes gleaming.

"He is powerful, yes. Dangerous. But he is also remarkably *like us . . ."* The wrinkled leader began to pace back and forth, his cane clicking in the vast quiet.

"We have searched for what makes them human," Mr. Book reminded. "He can *show* us, yes. He can lead us to what Dr. Schreber calls 'the soul.' We feel it's time for our experiment to move into a *final* phase . . ."

Mr. Book turned and pointed his cane at the great carved face high above them.

"SHUT IT DOWN!"

A whir of gears and grinding machinery echoed in the domed chamber.

"Shut it down forever!" Mr. Book exulted as the great face began to split apart. "We no longer need other subjects. Time for study is over . . . It's time *to be one with John Murdoch."*

A profound sense of dread covered Murdoch's awareness like a shroud. Paralyzed with horror, he watched the Big Clock slowly appear.

Then: the second hand stopped forever.

Murdoch felt himself floating in a vast ocean of silence. As if peering underwater, he saw Mr. Book open a suitcase and pull out a strange silver syringe. The crystal tube held a black fluid—swirling like thick smoke.

Mr. Book gazed intently at the fluid, before he turned and nodded.

A silhouetted figure, seated in a bizarre metal wheelchair that was part steel prison and part robotic skeleton, rolled into view. As he came into the dim light, Murdoch saw it was Dr. Schreber, locked in a heavy metal straitjacket.

The device allowed him only slow, limited movement of his arms. Schreber looked haggard, his watery eyes dull and listless.

Mr. Book held out the syringe. “You will do the honors, Doctor.”

Painfully, with great effort, Schreber lifted one of his ponderous skeletal arms. He extended his hand—and took the syringe from Mr. Book. Then, with a wrenching lurch of his imprisoned limbs, he wheeled himself to Murdoch’s side.

Murdoch’s rapid heartbeat hammered at his numbed brain.

“What? I don’t . . . understand . . .” he said hoarsely, mouth dry as dust.

Schreber’s voice seemed to be inside his skull.

“You’re going to be Imprinted with the Strangers’ own collective memories . . . They want to make you *one of them.”*

“Imprint, Doctor!” Mr. Book commanded, each word a threat. “No more disobedience!”

Dr. Schreber winced in agony as he lifted his steel-ribbed arm. In his hand was the syringe with the black fluid.

“I’m so sorry, John . . .” he gasped.

Murdoch watched helplessly as the needle came closer to his skull.

“The pain will only last a moment,” Schreber assured.

Murdoch struggled vainly against his bonds. He could barely move his shoulders and arms. Lifting his head, he saw Dr. Schreber’s pasty features looming over him, blocking out everything else.

A bolt of pain pierced his cranium. When the needle bit his brain, the agony flashed like a nuclear blast.

Murdoch’s scream trailed him all the way down the bottomless blackness . . .

. . . A door opened.

Sunlight.

Young Murdoch ran across soft sand—giggling. Full of boundless

energy, he tried to elude his pursuer. Finally Murdoch's father wrestled him to the ground, both of them laughing breathlessly.

Suddenly the child pointed at someone.

The lonely figure of an ice-cream vendor—pushing his cart along the boardwalk. Father lifted the boy on his shoulders and jogged over to the vendor.

The vendor was Dr. Schreber.

He looked up at the little boy and handed him an ice-cream cone.

"You'll reach greater heights than that, my boy," Schreber predicted. "One day when you're older—*you'll understand.*"

His last two words dropped in his mind like stones in a pool. Ripples spread across his memory.

A pretty woman—Murdoch's mother—waved from the window of a nearby beach house. Father put young Murdoch down. The boy ran up onto the verandah and into the house. As he pushed through the front door . . .

Murdoch, age nine now, sat at a small desk near the window of his bedroom. He pulled out the Shell Beach notebook, reached for a pen and started to draw.

A moment later he let go of the pen—and *it continued to draw on its own.*

Murdoch glanced out the window and saw the mailman standing on the front path, delivering letters.

It was Dr. Schreber.

"That's it, John," Schreber urged. "Practice makes perfect. Remember what I told you. *Remember.*"

As Mailman Schreber walked away down the path, he turned to call out one last bit of advice.

". . . And never talk to strangers."

Dr. Schreber kept his eyes on Murdoch's sweating, twitching face, ignoring the pain of his metal straitjacket. Intently, he monitored Murdoch's reactions. With all the energy left in his broken, steel-caged body, Schreber willed Murdoch to trust his memories.

As he watched, Schreber squeezed the large, silver syringe in his fist—*still full of swirling black liquid.* He had not used Mr. Hand's syringe at all.

Instead he had used his original syringe. The one Murdoch tucked in his pocket back at the bathhouse. The syringe that contained

Schreber's fabric of memories. Not those intended by Mr. Hand. Schreber's *secret formula.*

Schreber prompted Murdoch under his breath.

"Remember, John, remember . . ."

A few feet away, Mr. Hand scrutinized the process with mounting doubt. He squinted uncertainly at Murdoch's squirming body, dimly aware that something was quite wrong, yes . . .

* * *

Murdoch, age ten, still clutching his Shell Beach notebook, stood surrounded by a group of classmates. They were quietly listening to something their teacher was saying.

The teacher was Dr. Schreber.

Schreber led his charges past a railing that overlooked a factorylike conveyer belt. The moving belt was filled with human bodies, being processed by black-garbed Strangers.

"Now follow me," Schreber told them. "We wouldn't want to lose any of you down here . . ."

The entire class gathered around the Great Pit.

Silently, they gawked in wonder at the awesome roots of the city.

"This is where it all happens, children," Schreber said proudly. "There are the machines that shape the world." The wispy-haired teacher caught John's eye.

"Are you listening, John? Are you *paying* attention?"

The beach house was burning.

The flames cast a Halloween-orange glow against the night sky.

Cries and shouts filled the air outside the fire truck. Wrapped in a blanket, Murdoch, age twelve, watched the firemen run past the truck. The driver in the front seat turned around.

Schreber.

"You'll survive this, John," Schreber said cheerfully. "I promise you that. You'll *find* strength within yourself—and you will prevail."

As Murdoch turned to look back at the burning beach house, a fireman closed the truck door . . .

. . . A door opened.

Teenager Murdoch ran inside carrying a school satchel. Uncle Karl,

not yet in a wheelchair, greeted him warmly, then went back to cleaning the fish tanks in his aquarium.

Hungry, Murdoch grabbed a candy bar from the concession shelf next to the box office. The man in the box office smiled and nodded.

Schreber—wearing a "Neptune's Kingdom" cap.

Murdoch paused at the bottom of the stairway, concentrated, and managed to *levitate* himself to the landing.

"Well done!" Schreber congratulated, his watery eyes beaming. "You're getting the hang of it! Maybe one day all this will be yours, John—and I'll be working for you. Wouldn't *that* be a kick in the head?"

Murdoch strained against the straps binding him, beads of sweat running down his face. His senses were coming back into focus. His eyes fluttered open and he saw Dr. Schreber watching avidly from his mobile steel prison.

"Remember, damn you," Schreber muttered under his breath. *"Remember . . ."*

Mr. Hand realized the experiment had taken a dangerous turn. Mr. Murdoch's memories had not merged with theirs. Instead he seemed to pose an even greater threat.

Anxiously, Mr. Hand approached the operating table. "Something is wrong . . ."

Murdoch, now a young adult, walked into the restaurant. The maitre d', *Schreber,* greeted him effusively.

"Right this way, sir. You're the first to arrive."

As Schreber led Murdoch to the table, he whispered urgent words of encouragement. Murdoch looked at him strangely, as if he didn't understand.

"The *first* Mr. Murdoch," Schreber confided tensely. "I've altered these memories, John. You have the talent, but without experience, years of training, you cannot use your power."

Schreber turned and peered at Murdoch.

"I've given you that now."

As Murdoch fought to remember, strength flowed back into his limbs. The buckles of his arm and leg restraints stretched apart—and started to snap.

Mr. Hand grabbed Schreber's wheeled prison, spinning him around.

Schreber dropped the black-bile syringe. It shattered on the floor, releasing dark, noxious fumes.

Mr. Hand looked from the broken syringe on the floor, to the *empty one* clutched in Dr. Schreber's hand. Then he understood. They'd been betrayed.

"What have you done?" Mr. Hand hissed, advancing on his helpless prisoner . . .

Murdoch sat at his table in the restaurant.

Schreber passed by, carrying menus. He paused and leaned down conspiratorially, like a World War Two spy in a B movie.

"Do you know what they'll do to me if they find out I've given you these memories?" he asked with frantic urgency. "I *know* what you're capable of—there's a chance we can beat them. But you must act now!"

Murdoch spotted his dinner guest arriving and stood up to greet her.

Schreber made a final plea. "The world can be what you make it," he said fervently. "Anything you want, John. You have the power to make it happen."

He backed off as Emma approached the table, her cool ivory features brightening into a loving smile.

"Stop him!"

The high-pitched screech jolted him awake. Murdoch blinked and saw Mr. Hand charging wildly toward him, knife thrust forward like a sharp metal tusk.

The Stranger's eyes blazed with hatred as he swung the knife down, viciously chopping at Murdoch's face . . .

19

Hot blood spurted from a gash in Murdoch's cheek. The pain seemed to focus his energy.

An electric surge snapped through Murdoch's spine. The straps binding his wrists twisted like taffy, freeing his hands. The table beneath him suddenly melted, flowing to the ground like molten plastic as he sat up!

The Strangers broke ranks, scurrying about in a panicky, insectlike manner. Some started moving toward Murdoch.

Murdoch flexed his will and the energy bolted, ripping a table near Mr. Hand right off the floor. The table flew at the advancing Strangers, knocking them aside like bowling pins.

Still imprisoned inside his steel-ribbed straitjacket, Dr. Schreber gasped. Then he laughed, eyes wide with wonder—and delight.

The Strangers warily picked themselves off the ground, their eyes fixed on Murdoch. As if on signal, they scuttled away in different directions, like roaches surprised by sudden light.

Murdoch spun around and glared at Dr. Schreber. The laughter caught in Schreber's throat when he glimpsed the shimmering intensity in Murdoch's deep-set eyes. The little man looked away, stiffening fearfully inside his wheeled prison. An instant later the shriek of wrenching metal burst through Schreber's brain, and his body lifted.

The little man blinked rapidly, chest heaving. The wheeled prison had burst open, its steel bars torn apart like a grilled lobster. He was free.

Free. Schreber's arms and legs moved as if weightless. He stood up effortlessly and glanced around.

In blind panic, the Strangers were fleeing en masse. All except one.

Mr. Book stood his ground, wrinkled face set like a white cobra, weaving from side to side.

A shiver shot through Schreber's belly when he saw the ancient Stranger convulse, his long body lashing like a tree in a typhoon. Mr. Book clenched his teeth grotesquely and planted his cane on the floor.

A great tremble rippled across the walls.

Schreber covered his head as waves of distortion began to radiate from Mr. Book. The thick pulses pulled at Schreber's flesh.

Instinctively he looked for Murdoch.

As if peering underwater, Schreber saw the energy distortions flowing at Murdoch—then deflect around him. Somehow Murdoch was creating his own little *bubble of stable reality* within the seething torrent of energy.

Schreber hurriedly backed away, realizing he'd be shredded in the crossfire. But there was no place to hide.

Suddenly the intensity escalated as Murdoch challenged Mr. Book's power with his own.

Schreber felt as if he'd been sucked into a bottomless whirlpool. Unable to breathe, he flailed his arms as if trying to swim. His body began to quiver.

A searing flash illuminated the vast underground chamber. Eyes bulging, Schreber saw Murdoch and Mr. Book facing each other a second before their Tuning energies collided like massive comets.

Cataclysmic tremors shook the colossal roots of the city. The domed chamber began to warp and churn; walls buckled, corridors spiraled like corkscrews—crushing the Strangers trying to escape.

A chaotic thunder intensified the confusion as the pressure mounted. The shrieking cacophony expanded like gas in a balloon, stretching the chamber to the breaking point.

Stairs narrowed, doors elongated, floors cracked, glass shattered, ceilings squashed down, the great dome sagged—another moment and the entire world would collapse on itself . . . A dimensional earthquake of cosmic proportions.

Clutching the rim of consciousness, Schreber saw everything twist inside out—the city writhing in monumental chaos . . .

Then he glimpsed Mr. Book and Murdoch locked in psychic battle, their epic clash drawing every dreg of energy from their flesh. Mr. Book gritted his rotting teeth, bony white fists clenched as he pushed his will to the brink of death.

Schreber's vision fluttered and he saw Mr. Sleep crawl into view, his small child's fist gripping a shiny blade. Schreber tried to call out but the crushing energy crammed the warning cry back into his chest.

Again the intensity expanded and Schreber dimly saw Murdoch, blood streaming down his gashed cheek. The great chamber became a huge, fragile bubble. The walls bulged, pushing through their boundaries—rising through the earth.

Then everything exploded. The Central Chamber erupted through the streets. Mr. Sleep lunged at Murdoch, blade slashing . . .

Schreber heard a scream and saw the wall burst open—the vacuum sucking Mr. Sleep down an endless, spiraling corridor . . . into infinity.

His childlike shrieks ignited another eruption, hurling Schreber into the air.

He landed hard on the crumbling street and clambered to his knees, trying to find shelter. Schreber looked up and saw Mr. Book and Murdoch levitating above the city, circling each other like hungry falcons.

All around them buildings buckled, swayed, shivered, and bent, as their energies clashed. With a sudden surge the Stranger moved. A dagger jumped into Mr. Book's hand and he whipped the gleaming blade directly at Murdoch.

The dagger streaked like a heat-seeking missile on a beeline for Murdoch's forehead.

An inch from his skull it stopped.

The blade hovered in midair, like some lethal hummingbird. Then, slowly, it turned.

Murdoch kept his focus on the dagger, pushing it back at Mr. Book. The blade began to spin as it gained momentum. It carved through waves of energy, working its way relentlessly toward the Stranger.

Realizing the tables had turned on him, Mr. Book clenched his skeletal fists, escalating his concentration beyond all limits. But the dagger continued to pick up speed, spinning inexorably toward his smooth white skull.

As the dagger rocketed closer, his eyes bulged with fear. At the last moment he jerked back.

Too late. With a wet *thunk* the blade pierced Mr. Book's skull like a melon—slicing the insect creature within neatly in half. Oily black jelly oozed obscenely from its severed organs.

Violent spasms shot through Mr. Book's body, arms and legs snapping and lashing like a madly dancing marionette. Suddenly he went limp, his lifeless form floating in midair, puppet limbs dangling.

An awed silence shrouded the darkness.

As Murdoch slowly descended to the sidewalk, the Big Clock flowered *out of the street*—bursting through steel and concrete like some monstrous night-bloom.

A straggling group of Strangers advanced warily, eyes fixed on Mr. Book's floating corpse. Murdoch understood they were helpless now. The city was no longer theirs to control. Nor was he.

One by one the Strangers scurried back into the shadows like frightened silverfish. Within moments the streets were completely deserted. A ghost city.

The only thing left was Mr. Book's lifeless form still drifting in midair.

Murdoch turned and saw Dr. Schreber crouched nearby, his pasty features glazed with shock. He got to his feet as Murdoch approached.

The two men faced each other without speaking.

Then Schreber glanced at the Big Clock protruding from the wreckage at a broken angle. Murdoch shrugged and moved closer to the Clock.

He saw the glint of a metallic scissor switch jutting from the Clock's back. Hesitantly Murdoch reached out.

He paused to look back at Schreber. The little man's face was taut with expectation. Murdoch realized it was up to him. Only he had the power to reactivate the world.

Gathering his will, Murdoch gripped the switch—and *thrust it down* . . .

20

The last show at the Freemont Movie Theater was over. Everyone was gone except the young woman asleep inside the box office.

Emma jolted awake. She'd dozed off sitting in the cramped ticket booth. Her lovely features seemed sad, as if waking from a bad dream.

The name tag on her blouse read: Anna.

She heard a deep ticking and glanced up at the wall clock. Time to go home. Mechanically she stepped out of the booth, slipped on her coat, and turned off the marquee lights.

Exactly as she always had—for as long as she could remember . . .

The bus hissed to a stop and the doors opened.

Emma climbed aboard, clutching a suitcase. As the doors shut behind her, she began moving down the crowded aisle.

The bus lurched and Emma bumped into someone wearing a hat. The man looked up.

It was Uncle Karl.

"Pardon me . . ." Emma said distractedly.

Obviously Karl didn't recognize Emma. He politely tipped his hat and stood, offering Emma his seat.

She smiled. "Thank you."

As Emma sat down she heard the faint ticking of his wristwatch.

Slowly, the bus pulled away.

From the shadows, Dr. Schreber watched it depart, clutching his black bag against his chest. An odd smile flickered across his pasty features as the streetlight illuminated the bus's destination. The large blue sign read: Shell Beach . . .

An ominous ticking threaded the silence at the edge of the city. Disorderly ranks of aborted buildings leaned against the black sky like giant headstones in a graveyard.

Murdoch made his way through the darkness guided by memory—and his ripening power. All of the buildings had a nightmare sameness. No windows. No doors. No shelter.

Nothing but blank façades and an endless maze of shadows, Murdoch reflected, peering around for some familiar landmark.

He thought about Bumstead. Was it possible he was still alive, eternally falling through an alien dimension?

A rustle of energy alerted his senses.

He was close.

Murdoch paused, trying to get his bearings. Then he saw it up ahead. A narrow alley leading into a mass of buildings. Drawn by his instincts, Murdoch moved into the darkened alley.

A few steps inside and it was no exit.

Flat walls rose up on every side like black cliffs, forming a concrete canyon. At the end of the canyon was a narrow, windowless building with one door.

As Murdoch carefully edged into the alley, he kept looking behind him. If any Strangers were lying in wait, he'd be trapped.

Then he heard it. A hushed boom rising and falling like a lullaby. The ocean.

Murdoch hurried along the alley to the door. The rhythmic crash of ocean surf grew louder as he slipped inside and began climbing the steep stairway.

Even before he reached the top, Murdoch gathered his powers. Instantly he connected to the huge twisted turbines and massive gears far below the city.

An electric hum filled the stairway.

Murdoch had begun *Tuning.* Now *his mind* controlled the machines deep in the pit. He paused on the narrow stairway, haunted eyes focused on his mission.

To re-create the world in his own image.

Murdoch heard the muffled whine of distant turbines as he reached the corridor. He felt the power as the city changed form. His haggard features seemed almost at peace as he moved to the door far down the hall.

"John . . ."

The reedy voice floated out of the shadows. A tall figure in black stepped into view.

"Been waiting for you, yes," Mr. Hand said, pale features apprehensive. Carefully, he moved closer.

"What are you doing?"

Murdoch shrugged. "Just changing a few things around here, that's all."

"Are we quite sure . . . that's what we want?"

The question swung in the air like a sword.

"I'm willing to take my chances," Murdoch said, moving to the

door.

Mr. Hand reached out to stop him. Murdoch saw the Stranger's limbs were shaking violently. The rejection was in its terminal stage.

"I'm dying," Mr. Hand said with regret. "Your Imprint is not"—he tried to smile—*"agreeable* with my kind. But I had to *know* what it's like—how you feel . . ."

"You know how I was *supposed* to feel," Murdoch corrected, anger cutting through his voice. "That person isn't me. It *never* was. But you'll never understand that, will you?"

Murdoch's expression was without pity or remorse. He knew the Strangers had no concept of mercy. He remembered the conveyer belts filled with naked bodies.

"You wanted to learn what makes us human, but you'll never find it up here . . ." Murdoch tapped his forehead. "You went looking for it in the wrong place."

He brushed Mr. Hand aside and moved toward the door.

"You need us, John," Mr. Hand called, "just as we need you." He tried to follow Murdoch but an agonizing spasm wrenched his body. The rejection.

"You need *us!"* he repeated, voice fading. "You exist because of us!"

We exist *in spite of you,* Murdoch thought, reaching for the door. He didn't even bother to look back, totally fixated on the door—and the hushed boom of distant surf . . .

Deep in the underworld, beneath the shattered dome of the Central Chamber, a nuclear glow radiated from the vast pit as colossal dynamos slowly creaked to life.

Turbines spun. Gears beveled. Giant valves turned—unlocking sealed channels. Suddenly thousands of pipes began to spew millions of gallons of seawater up through the bowels of the city.

The roaring water surged upward through soil and foundations, rushing through sewage tunnels, spilling over the streets, flooding every corner of the city.

As the torrential flow of seawater continued to rise, the city tilted slightly on its axis—displaced by the unstable liquid mass.

Murdoch focused—*Tuning* the city as it reoriented itself in space.

For the first time in an eternity, a nearby star—until now blocked by the twisted underbelly of the city—flared in the black sky. Its frail light punctured the darkness like a triumphant sword . . .

Fighting off the agonizing rejection, Mr. Hand edged down the long

corridor after Murdoch.

Aware he was being pursued, Murdoch didn't hesitate. His will focused on destroying the final barrier as he flung the door open.

Bright sunlight crashed through the darkness.

The painted wall was gone. A yellow sun warmed the air. Murdoch's deep-set eyes grew moist as he scanned the blue sky. A brisk sea breeze raked his hair. The cool salt spray refreshed his tired lungs.

Murdoch took a deep breath and carefully stepped outside.

A few feet behind him, Mr. Hand gathered himself and sprang. Knife high, he lunged at Murdoch.

Suddenly sunlight beamed into the corridor as Murdoch stepped away from the door—driving Mr. Hand back like a panther fleeing fire.

Weakly, the Stranger stumbled back into the protective darkness. When he reached the stairs he saw the muddy lake bubbling up.

Trapped between water and sunlight, Mr. Hand crawled into the shadows and curled up to die . . .

A long wooden pier jutted out over the clear blue sea. Seagulls circled the cloudless sky. Sunlight glinted off the glassy waves. It was a glorious day.

Murdoch could taste the salt air as he walked along the pier. He saw someone up ahead, standing at the rail. As he drew near Emma turned and smiled.

The name tag on her blue dress read: Anna.

"It's so beautiful here," she sighed, looking up at the sky. "So . . . *bright.*"

Her husky voice drifted through his memory like smoke. Murdoch nodded, suddenly feeling out of place in his crumpled wool suit. He stared out at the water.

"Do you know if Shell Beach is far from here?"

Emma pointed. "That's it over there."

Murdoch looked out across the bay. Tucked in a protected cove was an idyllic town, pale blue and white cottages gleaming in the sun.

"I was just on my way," she added. "Would you like to join me?"

Murdoch's haggard expression eased into a smile. He nodded and began walking with her. Then he paused. He realized Emma had been re-imprinted by the Strangers. Perhaps he was chasing another illusion. After all, Emma was someone else now.

She seemed to read his thoughts. "I'm Anna, by the way . . ." she said, fingering the name tag on her dress. "What's your name?"

“John . . .” he said gently. “John Murdoch.”

His deep-set eyes met hers and they both felt the connection. A seagull’s cry floated across the water.

Murdoch understood. It really made no difference who she was. Anna was here, with him. Now.

From here on they would shape their own memories. Tinted with all the exquisite shades of the human soul.

Together, they strolled to the end of the pier, toward the town.